

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

Robert Atkins, 2007

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*Francesca Davis:* – Freedom Project. We would again like to thank you for coming in and interviewing with us. It’s a great pleasure to have you come in.

*Robert Atkins:* It’s my pleasure.

*Francesca Davis:* So could you state for us your name and your current occupation?

*Robert Atkins:* Robert Atkins and I’m a retired educator. However, I’m also the director of religious education at my church, St. Augustine Catholic Church.

*Francesca Davis:* And could you tell us where you were born and raised?

*Robert Atkins:* I was born in Memphis, Tennessee and raised in LeMoyne Garden until my father and mother started making too much money and we got put out of LeMoyne Garden and moved over to Castalia Heights which another ghetto area, but for people who made more money than the ones who lived in LeMoyne Garden.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay, could you tell us a little bit more about your parents, like their names and what did they do for a living?

*Robert Atkins:* My mother was Marguerite Atkins. She worked at St. Joseph’s Hospital in the chapel there.

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*Robert Atkins:* She was responsible for making sure that the things that were necessary for saying the daily mass as well as cleaning to the chapel was concerned.

My father had a multitude of jobs. He worked as a night watchman at River – one of the local ramps here. I can’t think. It was McKellar Lake.

He was also a sanitation engineer at the school and he worked at Sears and Roebuck for many years until he decided he wanted to leave Sears and Roebuck, which is another story in itself.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay. Could you tell us a little bit more about the neighborhood you grew up in?

*Robert Atkins:* Well, it was public housing. I grew up in public housing, but I didn’t realize that I grew up poor until I went off to school and

they said that when you grew up in public housing, you grow up in poverty, but I had all of the basic needs that I had – that I needed.

[00:02:05]

*Robert Atkins:*

I was in Catholic school. Of course, tuition was only \$0.50 a month and I was on scholarship, but it was Catholic school and most of the friends in the neighborhood went to Booker Washington or Porter Junior High School, Porter High School.

So, you know, I felt very comfortable. I grew up very comfortable even though we didn't have all of the things that we thought that we needed in order to be happy.

In other words, we learned how to improvise like making skate trucks ourselves rather than scooters that Sears and Roebuck sold. We made skate trucks. We made sleds ourselves by using cardboard sliding down the hill, you know.

So it gave us an opportunity to improvise and to do things that helped us in later life.

[00:03:02]

*Francesca Davis:*

What about any brothers or sisters that lived in the household?

*Robert Atkins:*

I have one brother. He's deceased now but he was a year ahead – a year older than me and he did the same thing I did except for the fact that he broke his leg playing football early in life – I mean earlier – and so he didn't get a chance to participate in the different sports that I participated in.

But we grew up in a very religious family and, believe it or not, my father was the one that was the religious push behind me, you know. We – at that time in the Catholic church, a priest had to have an altar server in order to say mass.

[00:03:52]

*Robert Atkins:*

And so at 6:00 every morning – living in LeMoyné Garden and then going to school at St. Augustine, which is right next to LeMoyné North, which was right next to LeMoyné North, at 6:00, you know, I would hear the phone ring and my dad would get me up and I would go and serve mass for the priest every morning and my brother, just the opposite.

He would put the pillow over his head because he just – you know, he wasn't quite as involved in religious activities as I was and my mother was a very – she was the disciplinarian. She, you know, she was the one who said, "I'm gonna whip your butt. I'm gonna do this."

You know, she didn't say, "I'm gonna tell your daddy" because I spent my whole life and I think my daddy whipped me once just to show out in front of some of his neighbors or some of his friends, you know.

But my mother – my father was the one who just kept saying that he wanted one of us to be a priest, either my brother or myself to be a priest which never happened and I won't tell you why it didn't happen, but –.

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[00:05:00]

*Francesca Davis:* So religion played a great – a big role in your life?

*Robert Atkins:* Very much. Very much so, yeah. I thought about, you know, the – about becoming a priest and even all the way through college I thought about, you know, how great it would be to become a priest, but I just didn't get the calling that God – you know, God was not calling me to be a priest.

He was calling me to do other things in life and so as a result of that, you know, I just followed the will of the Holy Spirit and, you know, here I am today.

*Francesca Davis:* You mentioned that you went to St. Augustine. What was that experience like for you?

*Robert Atkins:* It was a beautiful experience. Well, we had nuns at that time. We had nuns with habits on and you could respect the fact that they were nuns, you know.

They used to walk down to my house in LeMoyne Garden and guys would be shooting dice on the corner, you know, and when they see the nuns coming in those habits, boom, they would get right, you know, even if they had to hold the dice in their hand like this, you know.

[00:06:03]

*Robert Atkins:* So, you know, it was a beautiful experience because of the fact that they constantly reminded you that you were eternal to God. Not only did they remind you of your – of how important you were, and growing up in that time we needed constant reassurance that we were important, that we were God’s children, that God did love us, you know, because once we got into the world, you know, we had to go to the back of the bus.

If we tried a hat on at Bry’s or Goldsmith or one of the stores there – if we tried a hat on we had to buy it whether it was too big or too small. We had to buy it because we couldn’t do it, so those things.

And then oftentimes, you know, I would see people talking to my father in a way that I didn’t – well, I didn’t like it but there wasn’t anything I could do because of the fact that my father was the kind of passive individual who just said, you know, “Let’s go, Robert,” you know, or “Let’s go, Lee, Jr. and Robert. Let’s go.”

[00:07:00]

*Francesca Davis:* Would you say that St. Augustine was kind of a stronghold in the African-American community during that time period?

*Robert Atkins:* It was in the sense that there were not as many schools and many of the people respected those of us who went to St. Augustine. On the way home, for example – well, at school I had to live like the nuns wanted me to live.

On the way to school – on the way home, I had to live like my parents – I mean like the people in the neighborhood thought that little Catholic boys should live and then when I got home, I had to live like my parents thought I should live.

So, you know, I had to live three different lives ’cause my partners and my friends were not necessarily living the same kinda life and – you know, as a Catholic boy should live, you know. So it was kinda difficult but it was fun. It helped me to grow strong. It helped me to grow stronger really.

*Francesca Davis:* What other activities were you involved in growing up?

[00:08:00]

*Robert Atkins:* Well, I told you about the altar server part of it and I played football and played basketball and the reason was because St. Augustine was such a small school that we had to participate in

all sports. All the guys had to participate in all sports, so I found myself playing football and basketball.

I was good in football. I made All Memphis and, you know, I got a football scholarship. Basketball, I was mediocre, you know. I just was out there with the short pants on and running around, you know. I wasn't very good in basketball.

But, you know, I did that and then I participated in the park program every year which was – you know, it's such a beautiful experience because of the fact that at the end of the summer all of the playgrounds would meet out at Lincoln Park out on Bellevue and then we would have competitions.

[00:08:58]

*Robert Atkins:* So all during the summer we constantly tried to get better in tennis and basketball and horseshoe and different things at the park so that we could move on out there and win – even track, you know. I ran track, you know, for Magnolia Park when I played with Magnolia, LeMoyne Garden when I did that, so, you know, I mean it was just a good life.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay. Growing up in Memphis, did you have any role models or people that you looked up to?

*Robert Atkins:* Dr. Holds. Dr. James Holds who was my godfather. I looked up to him because of the fact that he was of the few black doctors in Memphis but he was the one who took my father in when my father – when my father got mad at white folks, he was living in Coahoma County in Friars Point, Mississippi and so he got mad at white folks and he said, "I'm gonna run off from home." And so he came – he goes, "I'm going north."

[00:09:59]

*Robert Atkins:* And so he got as far as Memphis and ran out of money, so Dr. Holds took him in, gave him a job, and gave him opportunity just to get settled here in Memphis and he did that for so many people and Dr. Holds in 1937-38, somewhere round in there, he basically was an evangelizer.

He went out into the community – I don't care where it was – with our white priest and they would go into pool rooms. They would go into everything telling people about the Catholic church and how God was calling them to Catholicism and so, you know, he

was the kinda person that I tried to be like, you know, and then, of course, there were some teachers, Mr. Milliner, who was, you know, one of my football coaches.

Mr. Porter was the head coach of our football team and our basketball coach, but I think I used to say, “When I grow up to be big boy I’m gonna be like Mr. Porter.” And he was real fat so I guess I got that part straight but other than that –.

[00:11:05]

Video Cut 11:05:29

*Francesca Davis:* How long did you got to St. Augustine? Did you go there from kindergarten until you graduated?

*Robert Atkins:* Well, went there from first grade until 11th grade and then in the 11th grade we built what was called Father Bertrand High School and so the people from St. Augustine moved to Father Bertrand and my class was the first class to graduate from Father Bertrand High School.

*Francesca Davis:* And what year was that?

*Robert Atkins:* Nineteen fifty-eight.

*Francesca Davis:* Did you – you mentioned earlier how you would be with your father and he would – you would just be around him and just observing things in the city in terms of black and white relations. Did you ever yourself experience any acts of discrimination when you were growing up?

*Robert Atkins:* If I did, I was too dumb to know I was doing it – I was experiencing that, you know, because, you know, everything was fine with me.

[00:12:00]

*Robert Atkins:* I was never put in a situation when I was growing up when I was younger. I was more put in a situation to be even like that. You know, for example, you know, I knew to drink colored water when we went out.

I knew to sit on the back of the bus when we went places, you know, and so, you know, growing up I guess we knew our places

and, you know, we weren't going to get in trouble by going against whatever the law said to do.

Just like I said, you know, the thing that often disturbed me is the way that people talked to my parents, you know, especially in department stores where they were spending the little money that they had.

They were spending that money and people talked to them like trash, you know, and I just wondered why they would take it and then their only response was, "Come on, Robert. Let's not – we don't want to start anything," you know. So that's pretty much – you know, the way my folks operated.

[00:13:00]

*Francesca Davis:* What did you do after high school – you graduated?

*Robert Atkins:* Well, I really wanted to go into the Air Force, but my parents and my coach stopped speaking to me 'cause they were so upset. I had five scholarships – five scholarship offers to play football and a friend of mine had quit school and he joined the Air Force and he was in England and I said, "Boy, if I join the Air Force, I can go over and be with my friend in England," you know.

But my parents along with my coach decided for me that I was going to college and so I went to Xavier University in Louisiana and I majored in education. I majored in physical education.

[00:13:59]

*Robert Atkins:* And then I did my student teaching in – in my senior year, I did my student teaching and that's when I recognized I didn't like children. I didn't like nobody who liked children. But it was kinda late to change majors, but my emphasis, you know, my major was really physical education but I had a sociology major also, so I had a double major.

So I thought I wanted to be – gonna teach when I got out but I did not want to do that either. You know, I taught in New Orleans. I did my student teaching in New Orleans and the 7th Ward and the 9th Ward were in classes together.

I think I spent most of my time saying, you know, "Put that knife down" or "Stop that fight" or whatever, you know, so it just wasn't for me and so I just decided that it wasn't for me.



And in my senior year, 1962, before I graduated, President Kennedy sent his mother to Xavier because he has the thing, you know, “Ask not what you can do for your country but what your country can” – no, “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your county.”

[00:15:08]

*Robert Atkins:* And so he established the Peace Corps and so his mother came and talked to the graduating seniors at Xavier and there were 27 of us that decided that we wanted to go to the Peace Corps.

So we put all of our applications into one envelope because it said that if you are married put your application in the same envelope because they wouldn't split you up, so all 27 of us put ours in the same envelope and they sent us all over the world and I was sent to Columbia, South America and I spent three years there.

I spent two years as a volunteer and then one year as a volunteer leader or supervisor of volunteers that were coming in, so when I finished school I went to Tuskegee for a semester.

Video Cut 15:59:10

[00:16:00]

*Robert Atkins:* I went to Tuskegee and I got my certification in physical medicine and rehabilitation, but I didn't want to do that either so, you know, I used to tell my students when I was teaching at State Tech – I'd tell them that – you know, I was 47 at the time.

I said, “I thought I wanted to be in education. I didn't want to. Thought I wanted to be a social worker; didn't want to. You know, I'm 50 – now I'm 67 years old and I don't know what I'm gonna do when I grow up to be a big boy but whatever it is, I'm gonna enjoy it, you know.”

So I just let the Holy Spirit lead me, just take me along, you know, and when I got ready to retire that's what people asked me, you know. You know, “What are you gonna do now? You know, you're young. You're still good-looking. Now what are you –?” But, you know, they asked me, “What are you gonna do?”

And I said, “I'm just gonna let the Holy Spirit lead me.” And that's been the pattern of my life is – or my adult life 'cause the

Holy Spirit – I don't think the Holy Spirit was with me when I was younger, but my adult life, you know, I think it's – you know, it's being led by the Holy Spirit.

[00:17:00]

*Francesca Davis:* Okay. After your experience in the Peace Corps, what did you do after that?

*Robert Atkins:* I came home and got married and there was a rule that said if you get married on the 26th of August in 1965 – if you get married before then or – on that day or before then you would not be eligible for the draft.

Well, my wife and I had made plans for a August 28 wedding and all my friends said to me, you know, “Bob, go ahead and get married and then just have the ceremony on the 28th.” I said, “No, I just finished three years in the Peace Corps and they're not gonna bother me, you know. I don't have to worry about the draft.”

Well, I went on and got married on the 28th of August and the first – and I started teaching at Father Bertrand and the first of November I got the letter that I was being drafted into the Army.

[00:17:58]

*Robert Atkins:* So I went out to the Army – went out to sign up for the Army or to respond to the draft and this guy came out with this beautiful outfit on, you know, and chest stuck out, you know. He said, “We need eight volunteers for the Marine Corps.”

And, you know, my name Atkins. I'm right in front of him. I could feel his breath on me, you know, and he used a few explicatives like, “So and so, so and so, we need eight volunteers for the Marine Corps.”

And nobody moved and then he called us a lot of ugly names and then he said, “We need eight volunteers. You.” And my name was first – I mean I was the first one he pointed out so that meant that I had to go to the Marine Corps rather than go to the Army where everybody else was going.

But – so I spent three years in the Marine Corps and peace – and then went in the Marine Corps and then I got outta there and didn't know what I was gonna do then but, you know, I lived happily ever after.

[00:18:59]

*Robert Atkins:* Well, after that, you know, I came to Memphis and – came back to Memphis and I worked for the Memphis Urban League as a job developer and left there and went to the Memphis Chamber of Commerce and I worked at the chamber of commerce in the human resources department. Left the chamber of commerce and went to city hall in the manpower planning department.

Then went back to the chamber and then went back to – I was the first African-American – first black that was a division director for the city of Memphis. Wyeth Chandler appointed me in February of '94, I think, as the director of human services for the city.

So that was an honor that, you know, I carry deep in my heart also and I tell people all the time that these guys are getting a black Catholic Republican from the South. I got four strikes against me but it's all worked out very well.

[00:20:02]

*Francesca Davis:* What were your experiences like coming back to Memphis from the Marine Corps? What was it like for you?

*Robert Atkins:* It wasn't that hard coming back from the Marine Corps. The hard part was coming back from the Peace Corps because, you know, well, siesta was one thing that I really – you know, I really liked over in Columbia, you know, that two-hour break.

But, you know, everybody was my friend – everybody – and that's what my first wife used to accuse me of. She said, "Everybody's your friend. You know, everybody don't like you, Robert, you know."

And she used to always tell me that because if I see a person then you're my friend, you know, because – at that time I didn't but now I think I see God in everybody, you know, and I see the beauty of what they – you know, what God has done for them and so, you know, but at that time it was just a matter of being friendly.

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*Robert Atkins:* I had been three years overseas. People had treated me so well that when I came back to Memphis, you know, everybody I saw, you know, "Hey," you know. And I used to use a little terms like,

“Hey, sweets. What’s up, darling?” you know, and my ex-wife being very jealous as she was, you know, she didn’t like those terms.

But, you know, I really didn’t have any real hard transition coming from the Marine Corps because when I came back from the Marine Corps I went to work for the Urban League as a job developer which gave me an inside track as far as meeting other business executives, you know, because I was out there looking for jobs for quote “disadvantaged youth or disadvantaged people.”

And then when I went to the chamber of commerce which is, you know, all the business community then I was one of their boys, you know. I was in the chamber then. I was with the big boys, so I really didn’t have a really bad experience.

**Video Cut 21:58:04**

*Tiffani Smith:* When did you first start gaining awareness of the Civil Rights Movement?

[00:22:02]

*Robert Atkins:* Oh, I guess in 19 – about ’55, ’56, somewhere in there. My brother was at Tennessee State. He went to Tennessee State and he didn’t – he wasn’t quite as passive as they wanted him to be, you know, and he used to get in a lot of trouble up there ’cause he would fight, you know.

If somebody come up and spit in his face, you know, he gonna knock the hell out you, you know, whereas, you know, the Civil Rights Movement said, “Wipe it off and then go over to somebody else so they can spit in your face” or whatever, you know.

So, you know, he used to tell me these stories and so, you know, that’s when I really became aware of how really – you know, racism I knew way before then but, you know, the movement itself I was not involved in it. I was in high school. I was Mr. Memphis, you know, football and all of that.

[00:23:01]

*Robert Atkins:* Everybody knew me. Had a lot of girlfriends so – you know, so I wasn’t involved in the Civil Rights Movement until after, you

know, when I went to college, when I went to college really, in '58 when I went to college.

*Tiffani Smith:* Are there any events from the Civil Rights Movement that particularly stand out in your memory?

*Robert Atkins:* Yeah. When the bus was burned – was bombed in Birmingham or Montgomery, one of the two, but the people on the bus were brought to New Orleans to Xavier and they stayed in our dormitory at Xavier and I noticed that every one that was hurt, you know, badly hurt, they were white, you know.

And I said, “Now these white folk coming down from everywhere, you know, from the North to stand in my behalf” and that’s when I became really actively involved in the movement at that point, when I saw the sacrifices that they made in order that I might live a better life.

[00:24:06]

*Robert Atkins:* So that stands out, you know, because all of them came down to the dormitory and we had a chance to talk to them. We had a chance to see them, their heads bandaged and it was just an eye-opener for me as to how bad the Civil Rights Movement really was, you know.

*Tiffani Smith:* How did you begin to play your part?

*Robert Atkins:* Well, I started by just marching, you know. You know, any time I heard of a march I would go and I’d jump in the crowd and I’d march with them, you know, and then it got to the point where I felt like I needed to do more so I joined SCLC, Southern Leadership Christians, whatever that – SCLC. But, anyway, I joined that.

[00:24:52]

*Robert Atkins:* And they taught us how to – you know, how to fall, how to – you know, even how to respond whenever we were in a situation that the police were coming in to take us to jail or take us wherever, you know, how, you know, if you throw your hand up like that then you’re actually – you know, they could get you for striking an officer.

So the thing is when you fall you cover your head and I mean it was just a training session that we went through and we went

through that training session at Loyola University in New Orleans which was, you know, a predominantly white school, you know.

And that's where they – you know, it just kinda gave me strength to go ahead and to become involved in the movement more than just marching, you know, but just sitting in or going – I went to Canton, Mississippi, you know, a couple of times and I went to different places.

And then my parents finally asked me – said, “Are you gonna ever graduate from school?” You know, because every time they heard from me I was somewhere else.

[00:25:56]

*Robert Atkins:* But it was truly an experience that helped me to grow and get a greater understanding for mankind, but a greater understanding for what my forefathers did that, you know, I was fighting for at that particular time, so, you know, it's been nice. It's been interesting.

*Tiffani Smith:* Did things like the drive to register people to vote or school desegregation have an effect on you personally?

*Robert Atkins:* No. I mean as soon as I was able to vote – to register to vote I did, you know, and so all I would do is try to get other people to register but I did what I was supposed to do and that was to go and register for – and school desegregation, I was – like I said, I was in college. I was in college.

I was at an all-black school that whites were trying to get into because of the fact that we had such a tremendous pharmacy program at Xavier and our music program.

[00:27:04]

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*Robert Atkins:* And then Xavier right now probably produces more professionals like lawyers and doctors, medical professionals, than any other college, you know, any other historically black college or university so, you know, I was in a comfortable situation at Xavier. I'll put it that way.

*Tiffani Smith:* While you were traveling with the college groups with certain marches you were in, were there whites as well as blacks?

*Robert Atkins:* Yes, you know, quite – and, you know, that’s the thing I guess that motivates you to keep on going was that, you know, white people were willing to take up your cross and walk with you, you know, as, you know, Simon did with Jesus – Simon of Cyrene did with Jesus.

He took up the cross and walked with Jesus and these people were taking up our crosses and walking with us trying to get freedom for us.

[00:28:02]

*Robert Atkins:* So it did – it helped me a lot, you know, just to see them marching side by side with me and we tried to integrate it as much as we could and I started liking white women. I’m just kidding.

*Tiffani Smith:* Were you a member of any other organizations beside the SCLC?

*Robert Atkins:* NAACP. I had a membership in that and that was it. You know, any other civil rights organization you talking about? No, I was a member of Alpha Phi Omega fraternity which is a national service fraternity and y’all probably got one here but you might call it something else, but it was strictly a service fraternity.

It wasn’t a social fraternity at all. I was interested in the social fraternities but they had banned them from our school three years before I got there so I would have had to go over to Dillard University in New Orleans in order to pledge and people from Dillard didn’t like us anyhow so I just decided I wouldn’t pledge.

[00:29:08]

*Tiffani Smith:* Did you notice people around you getting involved in the push for equal rights?

*Robert Atkins:* Yes, very much so. Well, me and my friends – you know, I don’t know. I didn’t have such an impact on them but, you know, some of my closest friends, you know, once they saw me go out, you know, they said, “Well, we’ll go with you, you know. We’ll go to this.” And so, yeah, people started getting involved.

*Tiffani Smith:* Were there people in your life who helped to shape your thinking about civil rights?

*Robert Atkins:* Well, I would say the priests that have served in my church, you know, have helped, you know, because they were all white, you

know, until Jim Lyke came along. I'm sorry. They were all white until Jim Lyke came to be our pastor in 1969, I think it was, who was the first black priest in the state of Tennessee.

[00:30:06]

*Robert Atkins:*

So, you know, he came to the parish and he gave us a new way of looking at things, you know. We used to have – and I – this is Catholic mess but, you know, when St. Louis Catholic Church got ready to get new benches or new whatever in their church, they would send their old ones over to us and they would get their new stuff and we would always – we were kinda like St. Augustine Missionary Baptist Church, you know.

Anything anybody wanted to give they would always give it to us and Jim Lyke came, who was our first black priest, and he said to us; he said, "You know, we're not a missionary church. We're teachers. We're preachers. I mean we're teachers. We're lawyers. We're doctors, you know, and we don't have to accept these things, you know. Let us do for ourselves."

[00:30:57]

*Robert Atkins:*

And that is the thing that has just stuck out in my mind more than anything else. Let us do for ourselves. Now St. Louis continued to send us a contribution every quarter or every whatever to St. Augustine, you know, because of the fact that it was something that their parish wanted to do.

But, you know, if they wanted to send old furniture or benches or whatever, we wouldn't accept them and I think the last thing that we got was some benches and then we gave them to a local bar called St. Thomas Square which was, you know, over on a lot right across the street from our church and they put them in St. Thomas Square, you know.

So he did help us to recognize that, you know, there is strength in our community, you know, and we don't have to accept everything. We don't have to be a mission to all these churches that want to do some good things and so what they do is say, "Okay, we'll give it to St. Augustine," 'cause we were the only black church in – black Catholic church in Memphis, so.

[00:32:02]

Video Cut 32:03:18



*Tiffani Smith:* Do you feel as if you were directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement?

*Robert Atkins:* Yes, I do. I was very involved in it. At first I was not, you know, until that situation with the – you know, I probably could have lived the rest of my life had I not seen those individuals that came to Xavier with all the patches and all the bruises from their bus being blown up.

I probably could have lived the rest of my life being just as happy and padding my feet and, you know, eating watermelon.

*Tiffani Smith:* What impact did this experience have on you and your family?

*Robert Atkins:* Well, I think it brought my brother first of all to a realization that it was worthwhile. You know, the passive movement was worthwhile.

[00:32:56]

*Robert Atkins:* And then my mother and father, after they got over the fear of me being silly or getting hurt, you know, in one of the marches or in part of the movement, you know, it made them, I guess, more aware of or – they were aware of it but they'd never rebelled against it and they were not rebels but they were able to say to somebody, you know, "Hey, I don't go that – you don't do me that way," you know.

So, you know, I think my involvement helped my mother and father get a better view of – a closer look at what the fight – what the struggle was all about because they had been so passive and they had been so satisfied with the things that they were getting, you know, that they didn't feel the struggle, the civil rights struggle, except, you know, the discrimination which they were so used to it didn't really affect them.

*Francesca Davis:* Were you yourself afraid of being involved in any of the different marches?

[00:34:00]

*Robert Atkins:* Oh, yeah. Heart beat fast, you know, especially when the police came, you know, because, you know, we had songs that we would sing to aggravate them, you know, like, "I'm gonna be the chief

police. Oh, lordy. I'm gonna be the chief" or "We shall not – we shall not be moved."

You know, "Governor Jimmy Davis, he should be removed just like a pile of – in the alley," you know. Oh, yeah, we had things to provoke them, you know, and they were mad. They were mad, you know.

And then oftentimes we would march against – in New Orleans we would march against these whites who were saying, "Two, four, six, eight. We don't want to integrate," you know, and then we were going saying, "Two, four, six, eight. We want to integrate," you know. And then oftentimes, you know, we would meet, so, you know, it was a lot of that going on so, you know, and I was scared, you know.

You know, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared but, you know, I was committed. I was committed when I saw those people coming from Alabama bummed up – I mean bruised up, you know. That was my commitment.

[00:35:06]

*Tiffani Smith:* Do you think involvement or experiences varied on if you were a woman or a man?

*Robert Atkins:* I don't – no, 'cause we had just as many women involved in our movement, you know, and, you know, we had some very strong leadership, especially in Memphis. Maxine Smith was probably one of the strongest people in the country as far as leadership in the movement was concerned and she was an independent person, see.

You know, that was one of the things that used to disturb us was all of us worked for the man, you know. I worked for the chamber of commerce. You know, other people worked in the school system, you know.

[00:35:54]

*Robert Atkins:* And many of the guys had \_\_\_\_\_ from the \_\_\_\_\_ that participated in the march never got a job in Memphis because the superintendent of schools said that if you did anything in the Civil Rights Movement you would not get a job in Memphis.

And most of them had to go to Arkansas or other places to get jobs, so, you know, I mean there were a lot of women who had to

go and get jobs other places, also, so we had some very strong women in the movement, you know.

You know, you read about Martin and you read about the other people, but Maxine was such an independent person, independent person in that her husband was a dentist, and she didn't have to depend on the man, you know, for anything so she could speak out.

Whereas someone else who was working in the school system had to, you know, speak out but speak out through someone else because, you know – **Velma Charles** is another person who was president of the NAACP who was very strong, you know, and she worked in the system but she came out very strong because of the fact that she had the backing of the NAACP.

[00:37:11]

*Robert Atkins:*

You know, so if you had backing you could be strong but, you know, the independent person, you know, who could speak out and would – didn't have to face the retaliation or firing or whatever, then those were the ones who were supposed to take the lead in that.

You know, I participated in the school, you know, Black Mondays, for example, and I was working for the chamber of commerce then and, you know, the way that I participated was I would go to the meetings and I would – you know, and I would help work with them as far as strategies were concerned.

But I couldn't go out there, you know, 'cause they see Bob Atkins out there, chamber of commerce, then, boom, all of a sudden you find yourself without a job, you know, and there was a fear. There was a fear. Not only was I afraid of what was happening but I was afraid of, you know, my livelihood, you know.

[00:38:11]

Video Cut 38:11:25

*Tiffani Smith:*

Do you feel you were changed as a result of those experiences?

*Robert Atkins:*

Yeah. Yeah, I believe I was. You know, I think I'm a better man because of the fact that I did participate. You know, I think if I had just remained passive and not done anything at all then, you know, I would still be back there trying to catch up with people.

But I participated and so I saw the fruits of my labor and could appreciate it a lot more than those who chose not to participate. I feel like I was a part of it, you know.

You always feel better when you're a part of something like Rhodes College, you know. You know, you feel like you're a part of something. Okay, well, I'm sorry!

[00:39:03]

*Francesca Davis:* In wrapping up, thinking about how things were when you participated and thinking about Memphis today, do you think things have changed?

*Robert Atkins:* Oh, without a doubt. Memphis has changed tremendously. When I first – when I came home from – when I was working for the chamber of commerce, they invited me out to the country club out here on Southern Avenue.

I think it was Memphis Country Club or something and that was the topic, you know, the changes in Memphis and I made the statement that the only thing in Memphis that had changed was they had removed the colored signs from the – you know, and that's the way I felt, you know, and I felt strong enough to say that but now, you know, I see a different climate in Memphis.

I think Memphis has changed and I think that there's a greater respect one for the other.

[00:39:59]

*Robert Atkins:* You know, people recognize that African-Americans can do things and be successful at things, you know. People recognize that African-Americans get the quote "good education" that was once denied us because of the fact that we were black. You know, people recognize that we can be leaders and we can be movers and shakers, you know, in this time.

Now the only thing is – that I think we're lagging behind is in economics, you know. We just do not have the basic economic privileges that the whites have right now, you know, and I don't know how that's going to change. I don't know how we can even change that, you know.

We make a breakthrough and then something happens, you know, and, you know, all of a sudden you start back at home plate rather than at first base or second base.

[00:41:01]

*Robert Atkins:* But, yeah, I think Memphis is a lot better place now that I'm 60-something, almost 70, you know. I think Memphis is a much better place than when I grew up, yeah.

*Francesca Davis:* What advice would you give to people from our generation to keep Memphis moving in the right direction?

*Robert Atkins:* Oh. Well, you know, set goals. Set positive goals for yourself rather than fighting what was, set goals that says this is where we're going and then gather the people the same way we gathered people to fight against segregation. Gather the people to fight for those particular goals that you set.

You know, and I'm sure all of you are setting goals or else you wouldn't be here at Rhodes but, you know, you've got to have people to buy into those goals with you, you know. You can't do it alone.

[00:42:04]

*Robert Atkins:* We should have just as many organizations that are moving forward like the Black Business Association or the medical – the Black Medical Association or the Black Ministers Association with some real goals for our young people to move forward rather than just the people who are here, you know, who have quote “made it,” you know, being here and not helping you to get – obtain the goals that you have set for yourselves, you know.

And then for young people to listen to the elders and that's one thing that I have found that people, you know – oh, he don't know what he talking about. Well, you know, keep in mind, you know, we went through it and we don't want to take over.

[00:43:01]

*Robert Atkins:* We just want to guide and lead and direct you along a path that says that I think this is the way to do it and I think you should move forward from there, but you got to be together and, you know, right now we aren't together, you know.

Everybody's going their own way. Everybody – you know, whether **the crab** concept, you know, you make it to the top and somebody pull you down. That's what's happening.

*Francesca Davis:* Well, again, Deacon Atkins, it's been a great honor and pleasure to be able to interview you today and thank you for sharing your story with us so we can in turn share it with everyone who'll be viewing our Web site, so thank you.

*Robert Atkins:* Okay, well, thank y'all for all those hard questions and now can you make me pretty?