



## Bill Short, 2007

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Interview of Mr. Bill Short. Interviewed by Francesca Davis and Joshua Jeffries of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mr. Bill Short is currently the Coordinator of Public Services for the Rhodes College Library. He recounts his experiences growing up in a small, rural farming community during racially segregated times. Furthermore, he describes the tensions of racial integration on Rhodes College's campus when he was a student in the 1960's. Mr. Short relates how he worked at the personal level to increase tolerance and understanding while in college and now.

This interview was conducted in 2007 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.

*Joshua Jeffries:* We'd like to say thanks on behalf of the Crossroads Project for, you know, taking time out of your schedule to come and share your story, so to begin, can you state your name for the camera, please?

*Bill Short:* I'm Bill Short.

*Joshua Jeffries:* All right and what's your current occupation?

*Bill Short:* I am the coordinator of public services here at the Barret Library.

*Joshua Jeffries:* Okay. Where were you born and raised?

*Bill Short:* I was born in Franklin, Tennessee and lived there until I was 18 and then came to college here at what was then Southwestern and, one way or the other, have been here almost ever since.

*Joshua Jeffries:* Mm-hm. Can you tell us a little bit about your parents, who they were and what they were like, especially when you were growing up?

*Bill Short:* Sure. My father, Jesse Short, was a farmer and a banker. I think I would put those in that order 'cause though he started in the banking business in the '20s in a fourth or fifth generation in the same bank, he loved farming and after World War II gave up the banking part and just continued to work exclusively as a farmer.

[00:00:59]

*Bill Short:* So all of us grew up on a farm and it's a family business, as you know, so my mother, my two brothers and my sister and I all participated in that and it's an interesting life. Since it runs 24/7,

365 days a year, you have a certain kind of rhythm to your life, the way you live your life.

You know, there's school and church and all those things, but at any other time, it's pretty much farming, so. Mother did not work outside the home. She had her hands full with raising us kids and helping in her own way to run the farm. She had her activities and duties as well.

My sister, Maryanne, is 14 years older than I. She came here to the college in 1953 as a student. My two brothers, one of whom is deceased, grew up there as well. My remaining brother still lives on the farm there outside Franklin, and my other brother was a banker.

[00:01:59]

*Bill Short:*

So it was good that my father had two sons, one who wanted to be a banker and one who wanted to be a farmer, since I chose to work in the library profession, so.

My sister has, in her retirement, moved next door to my brother, so we still have a very sense – a very close sense of that farm and that place as a space for us all, especially the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of our parents, as a place to collect. It seems very much like a central point for our lives to collect in.

Most of the family still lives in either Franklin or Brentwood or Nashville and there are a couple of others who live – I live here in Memphis and have for 40 years and my nephew lives in Colorado, so we're the two strays.

But the rest of us all enjoy checking in during the year with my brother and sister and getting to catch up on the family, you know, that we haven't seen in a while. Of course, email and sending pictures to each other helps, but we all inevitably end up back at that farm.

[00:03:04]

*Joshua Jeffries:*

Mm-hm. Could you talk a little more about this farm? What type of farm was it and how it was growing up on a farm?

*Bill Short:*

Well, as I say, it's a lifestyle that's pretty much vanished. My brother was the last to run the farm and he shut it down in 1994 as a farm that we run. Our family has lived there since the 1870s, my

father's family, and I mention all this to say that it becomes very much a part of your life.

Not having lived on this farm for 40 years, I still feel like that's home. I know it seems funny for some place you've lived for only 18 years when the rest of your life has been spent elsewhere but, as I also mentioned earlier, when you work in a place – and I don't think work is a four-letter word. It's not a bad word.

When you live in a place and everything that you produce is either used by you or it's goods and services that we all need, farming, mining and forestry pretty much give us everything we have.

[00:04:04]

*Bill Short:*

So a sustained family farm like ours had a dairy farm which ran year-round – that was income on an ongoing basis – cattle, beef cattle, hogs and sheep, which were their own producing income but only so many times a year, and then a tobacco plantation.

There were actually four farms in this cluster, most of them belonging to my father's family, and one by one we've sold these off so that we ran only just the one dairy farm with tobacco, the beef cattle having been sold off along with the hogs back in the 1980s. The economics of farm life changed a lot just in my lifetime.

Since 1949, when, I was born up to the 1970s, it pretty much looked like it had for 100 years before with a family working daily to keep livestock fed, to keep crops ready to go and waiting for something like a hailstorm to come and ruin a crop or a freeze to ruin a crop, in which case you have to decide how to back up and start over.

[00:05:13]

*Bill Short:*

And this would affect the livelihood of us, the owners, but also those families that lived with us who were depending on this income, the shared income, from these crops and from the livestock. This could also – the dairy could also be affected as well.

So when it got to be time for my sister and for me to go to college, and we chose a small liberal arts college like this, there was an expense to be considered and the people who make loans – my father would understand this, being a banker – were saying, "You

have a large capital investment here. We're not gonna give you any money 'cause you could sell off some of this."

My father would point out, "Well, if we sell off some of this, we can't make a living." So kinda caught on the fact that we need the cows to make the milk.

[00:06:00]

Video Cur:06:08:00

Bill Short:

My brothers went to UT Knoxville so there was less of a strain on the family at that time. The families that lived with us – I guess the one that lived with us the longest would be the Ivys and Mr. and Mrs. Ivy had 18 children and they weren't all living at home at this time but they lived offsite.

They didn't live on the farm. They had a three-room house and they ate meals in shifts and the chickens came and went throughout the house. They did have electricity; did not have running water. It was an interesting space.

I asked Mr. Ivy once why he had so many children and he said, "Well, I had to have the older ones to look after the younger ones." And that was his idea. Mrs. Ivy did not wear shoes except in the wintertime and they both smoked pipes.

It was very much an Appalachian-style family. In fact, he used – and she – phrases like "thee" and "thou" and occasionally would say big words – they barely could read and write – like, "It commenced raining at 2:00 this afternoon."

[00:07:00]

Bill Short:

And I didn't know what they were saying. We didn't use these words, but they'd lived in east Tennessee most of their lives. They came to sharecrop with us and stayed there about 20 years. The other family that stayed the longest were the Browns, Leroy and Annie Brown.

He became the dairyman for my father back in the late '40s and stayed there the rest of his life and we got to be more than working companions.

Our work together – well, with all these families, but our work together would be on a day-to-day, hour-to-hour basis and the

failing meant that we both lost money together. The success meant that we both were able to maybe do some things we hadn't planned to.

A "for instance" on this was the Browns, an African-American family, again, who lived there on the place with us, wanted a television set in 1949, but Mother and Daddy hadn't bought one 'cause Daddy was kind of a cheapskate and didn't want to bother, you know. This isn't gonna catch on and all that stuff. Finally, he said, "Okay, we'll buy a TV."

[00:08:00]

*Bill Short:*

Well, Mr. and Mrs. Brown went out the next day and bought one just to say, "We don't want to do something ahead of, you know, the family we're – that were hosting us." Interesting kinda parallel is the limitations I think we felt living in that period and working with these people and living with this people was the better way to put it. I learned a lot about myself and I learned a lot about the pride this family felt for their family.

If I ever said around Annie – and she asked me to call her Annie; she would be looking after me as a child – if I ever said the word "Negro" and it didn't come out with a clear "E" in it and sounded like "Nigra," she would correct me and tell me clearly this is the way that this word should be pronounced.

"African-American" was not a term used back then so she wouldn't have been expecting that anyway. But we would go on fishing trips down to the river and, you know, spend a lot of time talking together and she was corrective about language as well.

[00:09:03]

*Bill Short:*

You know, she was my parent in another sense of the way that my mother, busy working with the farm, would as a child let me stay with them or work with them on small jobs that a child could do. She would not go through a certain pasture on the way to the river because it had a bull in it and she was afraid of it and probably should have been, but that was a word I couldn't say.

We had to say "male cow" and I thought that was kinda, you know, overly polite but Mother explained, "Well, now, Annie's got her standards and we just need to go with that. That's – we don't say that word around there."

And their children and all the farm kids played together like sandlot baseball or something and we felt the same kind of excitement. At the end of a day, we'd probably jump in the river and swim around for a while to get cleaned up and come back to the house and take a bath but then we'd play together.

[00:10:00]

*Bill Short:*

And I think we felt in the sense of having shared the work schedule that we had all the same life growing up, until we would do something together where we couldn't be together, which would be – at that time, Franklin, like most towns, had – we would call it the picture show – the movie house, the one movie house.

There were two box offices. The one on the right was for whites. Our tickets would allow us to sit downstairs. The one on the left was for blacks and they had to sit in the balcony. I remember putting up with this and thinking, "That's so strange. We can play together. We can work together. But we can't sit and watch a movie together." And this is in the 1950s.

I came home and asked my mother, "Why is that?" And she seemed kinda pained to give me an answer and finally she said, "That's just the way it is." And she didn't like that answer but we were kids. We weren't gonna cause trouble but we couldn't figure out what the point to that was.

[00:10:57]

**Video Cut:11:04:12**

*Bill Short:*

The Jim Crow laws that had been in effect for a long time were still in play very much in the '50s and I think that's where we began to realize this doesn't make any sense, you know. This is not – this doesn't work. A short time after that, that changed.

One can enjoy the movie – the box office stayed there but it was just so you could buy tickets at two places instead of one and sit wherever you wanted.

Schools were not integrated when I was growing up. There was Natchez High School in the black community and then the Franklin High School and Battle Ground Academy, a private school.

And because most of my friends in junior high decided to go to Battle Ground, I chose to do that, too, again, a choice that put a little pressure on us to make sure that things were going well – there was a stability about farm life at that time – to – for me to make this choice.

It was an all-white school. Again, something else that seemed normative at the time. I think the real limitation was it was an all-boys school which meant we were all a little crazy by Friday.

[00:11:59]

*Bill Short:*

So happily, a school from Nashville, usually Harpeth Hall, would team up with us and we'd have cheerleaders and we'd have some more things like a regular high school would have had. Growing up in a small town comes with some advantages and some disadvantages, I think. I mean a great family.

I had a great situation of living outside a town of about 6,000 people and outside of a bigger city like Nashville with however many thousands it was at the time. So we could go to Nashville for big events, big ballgame, or see more movies.

We could scale back and enjoy the small town life and then, of course, we loved being on the farm 'cause it was quiet and, though you had a lot to do all the time, there was still plenty of time to play and, you know, this time a year, we'd be cranking ice cream or doing something like that on the weekend.

The disadvantages of living in a small town at that time was everybody knew everybody else and without us realizing it, there was a certain kind of pecking order, so that you had the mayor and the board of the aldermen and the wealthy people, the bankers and the lawyers and the doctors, professionals.

[00:13:08]

*Bill Short:*

And then there was just the great middle class and then beyond that, there were the people that everybody knew but didn't always know much about and some of these were transient people coming and going who would stay there for a while and others were just the people who were having trouble economically.

And this also broke out geographically so there were parts of town that, you know, again, we were not allowed to go to. There were – there was a – like in many southern cities kind of a patio society.



There were people who knew each other and had parties and pretty much spent a lot of time within each other's sphere of reference and that, again, would be the upper echelon.

The middle class folks were pretty much there for all the events that were open to the public and each had groups of friends but you sometimes wouldn't be limited just to those. You might know folks in another group and join up and have larger events.

[00:14:02]

*Bill Short:*

The one, I guess, big event for Franklin would be the rodeo where everybody of any stripe was able to come and enjoy and celebrate, again, the livestock that was grown around there. Everything from bulls and calves for roping to the horses were something that both the breeders and the stable folks were able to come and celebrate at one time.

But I do remember thinking that it was a strange thing that the swimming pool, the municipal swimming pool, was for whites only. When I questioned this, I got the same kinda answer from my parents that I'd gotten before.

That's just the way it's been, and that changed about five years later. It – that pool was shut down and another facility was opened up, a larger one, a better one, open to the community.

[00:14:54]

*Bill Short:*

The time I went to – the time I left Franklin in '67, it had just begun to make some changes, as with the rest of the country, so I was not participatory of those.

I came here to this college to find it being pretty much what it had been when my sister was here in '53, a lot of Presbyterian kids from Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, the \_\_\_\_\_ of the southwest, about 800, 900 students.

And the changes that were taking place across the country were not unknown to us and so we started fomenting for some changes here. When we got here in '67, we had to dress for dinner. Men had to wear coats and ties. Women had to wear skirts.

There were parietals. Women had to be in the dorm by 10:00 at night in the week and if their grades were up, they could stay out later on the weekends but you had to sign in and out like a reserve.

So going to pick up your date meant that, you know, you had to sign a card.

[00:16:02]

*Bill Short:*

We have some here in the archives. Men students didn't have these restrictions, by the way. The chapels were compulsory. We had Wednesday convocation every week and everybody had to go. You had to check your name off a sheet, big board outside there, the Hardie Auditorium.

And then Tuesday or Thursday we could have another kind of chapel, which could be either religious or educational, but these were done during the break in the morning. The morning break between the early classes and the late classes was about 30 minutes.

And some students got in trouble because they were beginning to say, "I don't know why I have to be herded in here to listen to a speaker or to come to these convocations," and they would start cutting chapel and they would get in trouble.

Some students were asking why if we're – this is a couple of years later – "If we're brave enough and mature enough to go off and defend our country and possibly get killed in Vietnam, why do we have to dress for dinner as a disciplinary action?"

[00:17:02]

*Bill Short:*

I think you can count on us acting, you know, like adults. So they started wearing just a coat and tie with no shirt to dinner to say, "There's your shirt and tie. There's your shirt and – tie and coat."

The parietals, too, were questioned as to, you know, why are we restricted to living in a dorm and being cared for like children when the men students seem to have free rein.

So little by little, I would say my junior and senior year most of these things had been abolished. You didn't have to dress for dinner. There were no more parietals.

Video Cut:17:43:10

I think we threw out the baby with the bathwater without knowing it by getting rid of that weekly meeting called convocation which

seems impossible now because there's so many of us but we all could squash into Hardie Auditorium.

The advantage to that would be that if somebody received an honor, they were tapped for ODK or some other group. Everyone saw that.

[00:18:00]

*Bill Short:*

I'm sorry. Convocation was in the gym. I said Hardie. Hardie was where the smaller chapels were held, the non-compulsory ones, but convocation was every Wednesday in the gym and, again, the best of it was if someone had something to be celebrated, we all celebrated it.

If it was – a faculty member had suffered a tragedy or if we lost someone, that, too, had a general public mourning. It was hard after that to see ourselves as a group or to feel connected and we have that problem now, I think.

We're all very connected with our computers but we're not very connected by being in any kind of general assembly where we see each other and catch up.

Well, we got a long way from the farm, but the background that I was gonna mention earlier about growing up in a town in the South and growing up in this particular town, in Franklin, is that it was shadowed forever by the Civil War.

[00:18:56]

*Bill Short:*

The very name of my high school, Battle Ground Academy, is based on the fact that it was the site – part of the major fighting of the Battle of Franklin took place on the soil.

What I did not know going to school there is that this school is on the front lawn of the home of my great-great-grandfather, John Bennett, and the farm next door, Fountain Branch Carter's farm is – well, this is my mother's family. A Carter married a Bennett and here's my mother.

When I learned in seventh grade in Tennessee history about the Civil War and about the Battle of Franklin and what a horrific loss of life it was and a series of misguided choices where something like 6,000 people are just killed in a 48-hour period and my great-great-grandfather's home became the Union troops' headquarters,

this whole story kinda palled on me because I was not particularly excited about my relatives having been involved in it.

[00:20:02]

*Bill Short:*

It was just the loss of human life. The more I learned about the Civil War in high school – the cause of it, the stand the South took – brought me to have to examine my feelings about the role my family had played in it, my mother’s family had played in it.

And with historical records and other things in times since then, my sister and I having done some research, we now have these diaries which we need to get transcribed and they need to be with the state records, I suppose.

It’s a funny position to find yourself in and I don’t know these people. They were dead, you know, for a century before I was born but, nevertheless, I have a sense of they – I belong to their story in a sense, you know. I’m their descendant as are my siblings and the rest of us and there’s a pageant now.

The Carter House is a museum and they call us from time to time and want some of the furniture and we explain we’re still enjoying the furniture.

[00:20:59]

*Bill Short:*

We – I sleep in a bed that was in the Carter House, but I don’t think it’s any better or worse for that. It’s just it’s – many generations in my family have been born in this bed. It just makes sense to me to have it and I’ll pass it on to a niece or nephew.

But when I found out that the Carters owned slaves, that they had about 80 people working the place, that they freed these people before the Civil War, they gave them as – kept them together as families. The families didn’t leave after being freed. Obviously, it was a good relationship. And they gave them farmland.

Admittedly, it wasn’t the best farmland but they had their own place after this. Some stayed and worked with the Carters. Some moved to their own place. I guess that’s good but as we all know, nothing really changed. There was no real system by which one could get an education easily.

As a landowner, you knew how to work land because you had been doing that with someone else but there was no easy backup if your

crops weren't coming in, back to where we started, I mean the whole gamble that farming and living off the land is.

[00:22:06]

*Bill Short:*

The families that lived with the Carters took their name. There are descendants of those Carters still living in Franklin. In fact, they had a reunion not too long ago at the Carter House.

They are having the usual trouble trying to find out who all else is in this group of people, but they find that interesting that the name is shared and that my mother, I know, growing up had a woman that lived with them, Ella Carter, and I don't know the generational descendency.

But my grandmother was born at the Carter House in 1877 and Ella Carter's mother was born there shortly after in the same place, so they – you know, these families paralleled quite a while and it's the same sort of thing of someone who's found themselves, as both these family members did, in a system they didn't create but in a happy working situation with each other.

[00:23:05]

*Bill Short:*

And Miss Carter stayed with my grandmother's family for a while. She married, left, and about 25 years later came back and lived in the house with them again and worked there and Mother was very fond of this woman and felt in so many ways – so many times she said she felt closer to her than her own mother because they spent so much time together.

When she died, when Ella Carter died, her tombstone was not very well made and it weathered away, so Mother had another one made, a better one, and put up.

There were no other members of that branch of her family to see to this, so that was something I thought – you know, again, my sense of who this person was to my mother in her life.

[00:23:53]

**Video Cut:24:02:05**

*Bill Short:*

The thing I mentioned earlier about feeling connected to all this is that even though Franklin is now very developed – it's a very wealthy area and has many more than 6,000 people – it has still

some groups like us who still live there with a sense of its meaning something to us beyond just holding some land which I guess could be worth quite a lot of money.

That doesn't have any interest for us. We hold this land because it has a purpose and it is still being farmed and we're happy about that, but we rent it out to an agribusiness owned by a friend who wants to see the same kinda sense of responsible use, crop rotation, and it's still a healthy way to enjoy the area.

What we're not happy about is the development, which is sort of erasing not just the agricultural look but some of the natural beauty of the land and they're actually starting to back up and start over with that, and I'm finding that more people have moved there interested in the history of the town and its association with the Civil War.

[00:25:01]

*Bill Short:*

And they have begun to look at the total picture of life during the Civil War period. As I mentioned, the Carter family reunion, African-American family reunion at the Carter House, I think says something healthy about how we all look back at this with kind of a helpless feeling of we had nothing to do with it. We won't change it.

We don't like the way it was but we live now and we can decide how we're gonna face this and how we're gonna react to it. I don't think about this very often. Living in Memphis as I do, this is something that it's come up because of this discussion.

It rarely comes up as part of our family reunions except we call and check in with the descendants of the families I just mentioned, the Browns, and the Ivys are all gone but two, but we kind of want to know how they're doing and what's happening with them, again because of this connection that went way beyond a business connection or even a family connection.

[00:26:01]

*Bill Short:*

But is, as I said, something where you work together, you suffer together, and you feel like you have a shared memory. I think that's what we all have said about this.

Are there any specific things beyond all this that you want to go through? I tried to think what might be interesting about any back story I had as to what you might want here.

*Francesca Davis:* Well, I have a couple of questions.

*Bill Short:* Okay.

*Francesca Davis:* What was the transition like coming from a farm in Franklin, Tennessee to Memphis and especially you came during a very turbulent time in our city, so what were your opinions or feelings about the...?

*Bill Short:* Well, that's an interesting question. It's gonna seem kinda corny but I was impressed with how light it was in the city at night – street lights.

I lived on a farm that was outside Franklin at the time. There was no highway. It was a dirt road and it was dark at night, so when you turned off the lights, it was dark. You could see stars. It was quiet.

[00:27:00]

*Bill Short:* I had not lived in a city – I'd lived near one – and that was a transition for me. Living with so many people that I knew from church camp, from NaCoMe, was in its own way sort of comforting.

There were people here, again good little Presbyterians all, so there was still some sense of Franklin and Nashville and the people I had known there.

There was a matrix of them here, which is why this nickname, childhood nickname, followed me to school – Bilbeau – a nickname that I was given when I was named for my father's best friend, Mr. William Miller, my first two names.

His nickname was Bilbeau, as was his father, so it goes back to the nineteenth century and it was some – either a firearm or something in their family, B-I-L-B-E-A-U, kind of a French spelling, became Mr. Miller's father's nickname and then his and then mine. We were born on almost the same day, so.

[00:27:59]

*Bill Short:* Millers couldn't have kids. My dad thought it'd be a great tribute and I thought it was fun. The nickname was fun for a small town but it seemed a little corny for a student at a college, so I tried to be Bill. That lasted five minutes, when all the people I already knew from back home were yelling, "Hey, Bilbeau."

To tie up a thread from the earlier part of this conversation, Annie Brown would not have that. Senator and then I think finally Governor **Bilbo** from Mississippi had this – and I don't know a lot about this – but he had some kinda plans for sending African-Americans back to Africa.

Where was that gonna go? But he was preaching this kind of hate from his pulpit and she and her husband just thought – they wanted to be polite again but they named – they gave me a nickname that sounds kind of African, Tanka, T-A-N-K-A. They referred to me as Tanka.

Everybody else could call me Bilbeau around the farm and I thought that was interesting, too. They just wanted to edit out that name because it meant what it meant to them and my parents thought that was fine.

[00:29:01]

*Bill Short:* They understood, but when you had a nickname like that, you can't stop that train. The faculty called me Bilbeau. I signed papers that way. It's laughable now.

When I came back to work in 1975 here, came back to the college to be an employee, Tom **Jolly**, one of our professors of Greek and Latin asked me; said, "Now what shall I call you? I've called you Bilbeau for four years. Now here you are with your tie on. Who are you now? They tell me it's Bill Short."

So I said, "Here it is. You're a language major. If I have the tie on, it's Bill. If I'm not wearing the tie, you can call me Bilbeau like you used to." So he likes that and to this day, he still does that. He checks my neckwear to see what he can call me.

But that really did become an issue for the Browns. That was – you know it was a red flag for them.

**Video Cut:30:10:25**

*Francesca Davis:* What activities were you involved in at Rhodes?

**Commented [RC1]:** Theodore G. Bilbo served as governor of Mississippi from 1916-1920 and 1928-1932, and also as a U.S. senator from 1935-1947. He was a staunch white supremacist, and a open member of the Klan.



*Bill Short:* When I was a student here?

*Francesca Davis:* Yes, sir.

*Bill Short:* Okay. I was – I’ll have to look it up to tell you – a member of the arts group which looked after both visual and performing arts, and that was enjoyable for me. Little did I know in my future that was gonna be something I work in quite a lot now.

But we helped plan the concerts and the art shows that came to campus that would be done more squarely by the art department, but that was something I felt passionate about and as a group, that’s something I joined. I was not a big joiner.

I was a Sigma Nu my freshman and sophomore years but I deactivated because it just sort of ran its course with me, with no ill will toward the group. I had found my academics putting on a little pressure so I just decided I needed more time back.

And the only reason I joined a fraternity in the first place is, again, all those people I knew from church days were here and most of them were in that group; some from high school.

[00:31:01]

*Bill Short:* So I joined up and enjoyed it but I didn’t need the socialization. I had friends that ran through every group and some of them didn’t belong to Greek groups and I was beginning to get a little complaints from the brothers ’cause I wasn’t sitting with the Sigma Nus at lunchtime.

And I said, “Well, I have friends that aren’t in the group and we’re having lunch. It’s okay, I hope.” I don’t know. It just didn’t work out, so I decant from that, although I will say that I enjoyed – we did do service projects, worked with Porter-Leath and worked with some other groups.

And I on my own instead of being a member of any specific group that did that – I didn’t join Kinney or any of those, but I did work with Porter-Leath. I worked with a school that’s now closed near here doing some tutoring.

I can’t remember other individual things but I tended to be a person who worked independently of groups and kind of a one-on-one thing.

[00:32:03]

*Bill Short:*

I remember directing two plays for the school with kids and they had a great time being in a play. Most of them didn't think they were actors and I said, "That doesn't matter. We're gonna – we just want you to feel like you belong in this piece and to get busy and be in it."

I was a member of other committees. At this moment, we'd have to look my little career up and remind me what they were. I worked in the library and through that I came to be the person that ran the library on Sundays which was nice that the staff let me do that.

And we raised money for the library by having – oh, I don't know what all we did but we'd have sales of things for Halloween and this sort of thing. We had some entrepreneurship. A friend of mine and I did this, so we had projects going on so that we could raise money for individual efforts.

[00:32:56]

*Bill Short:*

Unfortunately, they didn't show up on anyone's screen because they were not anything that was officially sanctioned. I remember friends who joined marches. One was over by the armory.

This was a civil rights group and I was invited to join them and for whatever reason, I chose not to at the last minute, not because I was afraid or I thought it was a bad idea.

I do not to this day remember why I didn't get to go on that. It was a peaceable march. Nothing happened that caused any problems with the police, but I always regret not having gone – been able to go through with that or gotten to have go on with that plan. I had planned to work with that group.

It was a local – it was a campus group and **Kathy Roup**, a name I think I mentioned to you earlier, was involved in organizing that but I don't remember any more about how it got started. You might want to ask John **Rone** about that 'cause I think he did participate in that.

*Francesca Davis:*

Okay. Do you have any significant experiences being a student at Rhodes, especially when there was so much activity going on during the city or in the city?

[00:34:01]

*Bill Short:*

Well, I remember the night Dr. King was assassinated. We were in the dining hall. Jameson Jones, dean of the college, came in and stood on a chair and asked us all to be quiet and to explain to us what had just happened. Everybody was very shocked.

He said that we needed to finish our dinner quietly and just go to our dorm rooms and stay there until further notice. There was no easy way to communicate with the campus. There was no email, so he was trying to go to collection points like the student center, the dining hall, each of the dorms, and just simply tell us, "Get in your dorm room and stay there."

Not every student had a TV, so we went to those rooms where there was a TV to watch with the rest of the nation what was going on right downtown.

And over the next two or three days, we were here, confused in one case by why half track or whatever they're called, a small tank – the National Guard was here – if I remember this correctly, wheeled into the library lane over there by the Burrow Library, came in and turned and went back out.

[00:35:08]

**Video Cut:35:26:01**

*Bill Short:*

I think they were equating liberal arts with the concept of liberal and I don't know what they were expecting but the campus was relatively quiet. There was – you know, we were near spring break, if I remember it. There was this bizarre snow also that happened just after that, I think. It was April and there was this odd heavy snowfall.

I may have these out of sequence but it was a surrealistic time. The events taking place downtown had us all shocked and saddened and there was a sense eventually of anger but overwhelmed by the fact that this was something that nobody really could explain.

We were just stunned. I had not been downtown during the marches and had been watching those on TV, though, and there were a group of us.

[00:36:01]

*Bill Short:*

I was living in Bellingrath at the time and we – because, again, the location of the TV would be one person’s room or another, there would be a group watching these at one time and it was a great way to be able to share our reactions to what we were seeing and to talk about how we felt about this.

I was not aware that Jim Lanier was participating in this, so I was glad to hear his stories about this later and how as a young professor he felt like that, you know, something had to be done and he had to see – had to be seen as being a part of it. I think I mentioned this in my written part.

To me, it was more of a one-on-one thing. I would have more success talking to a group of people in a dorm room and arguing a point trying to raise someone’s consciousness to say, “I want to hear your point but you have to defend it. You have to tell me why you believe what you believe.”

And I never really ran into anybody whose anger or bigotry was taking the wrong side of this.

[00:37:00]

*Bill Short:*

It was people who were confused about why this whole sanitation workers problem had started in the first place. We didn’t have all the facts at that point. We were beginning to learn that. We would have more to talk about with Larry Woodard’s trouble with the ATO fraternity. I don’t know if you’ve explored that yet or not.

Larry was one of the first and probably the first African-American to be pledged by a fraternity. The ATOs at that time still had the blackball system whereby the voting was done by moving a ball into a box and, you know, counting them later.

I don’t really know the sequence of events there ‘cause I wasn’t in that group but I just know that Larry’s acceptance into the fraternity caused some of the fraternity members to be angry and to deactivate and all of this – it went through two or three votes and was a very acrimonious event.

[00:38:01]

*Bill Short:*

And Larry felt like, you know, I don’t think this is gonna be a group I’m gonna feel comfortable being a part of. So he, though

accepted, said no, and that controversy stirred up the whole idea about, you know, can we have interracial fraternities here and it was that early exploration of, you know, why are these rules still in effect.

And, of course, some of this, I guess, may have been coming from national. I don't know. I have no idea if that was involved at all in this but that was a controversy and Larry is – I understand is living in New York. He is a musician. He has been a pianist at one of the bars near Lincoln Center for a long time.

So he would be someone I think who would be very interested in cooperating with this project. He was not comfortable being in the spotlight with this and Larry's someone else I've known since church camp days. His gift for music was born. He could play anything any time anywhere and as a youngster.

[00:39:04]

*Bill Short:*

Then, of course, by the time he was here was a much more accomplished musician than almost anyone on campus but that didn't matter to anybody. It seemed to be – we seemed to be stuck on this issue of his being black, the first black in a fraternity.

So that same kind of sessions in the dorm – chat sessions in the dorm that turned into something other than just for fun. What was happening to Larry Woodard became the topic for discussion frequently and people were divided on this about, you know, it was the fraternity's fault or we shouldn't push this issue.

I mean, you know, let's see if groups – if there could be a black group and that would spark another counter debate about why, you know. Why not have anybody who's accepted in the fraternity be in the fraternity? What's the problem with that?

We had a speaker – back to chapels – in Hardie, so it was one of the elective chapels. What was that man's name? Sweet Willie Watson? I may have his name wrong.

[00:40:04]

*Bill Short:*

He was, I think, Carl Walters' choice as a speaker. Those of us who went that day were a little horrified at his language 'cause that's not the kinda language – it would have been that pulpit right there that he would have been speaking from and his message was that of a black militant but it was mistaken.

I think people got the wrong – they misunderstood what he was saying. His sense of change was that people – some people are gonna have to die, but his comment was – what he should have said – of natural causes. In other words, we'll have to move to a new generation.

The people who have grown up under this apartheid Jim Crow concept are not gonna change and it's only the hope of a new generation of people with that is the hope that we can actually make some changes. Well, his long hair, his beret, and everything else just were sending the signal that he meant die like today, this afternoon.

[00:41:00]

Video Cut:41:20:29

Bill Short:

And though the group was small, there were enough people there who weren't quite comfortable with what he was saying, so that became a controversy. I don't know if that's in the Sou'westers or not but you might want to take a look and see if we can isolate that event; look at that as well.

I'm trying to think of other individual events that would have been something that would have all be affected by but certainly in the situation where I'm talking to friends and we found a variety of opinion, I think the whole idea of being here and having faculty who took time for us and as the alma mater says, "Train the truer mind," trying to maintain an open mind, struggling in some cases for some people with an inherited built-in bias was difficult.

I mean that we all found out, I think, that we're all racist and had been in the sense that we had preconceived notions – I'm speaking of my generation now – preconceived notions which were brought to us as children, like I mentioned, about the movie theater.

[00:42:03]

Bill Short:

I mean that didn't feel right but it was the normative behavior, supposedly. I think it's only somewhere at this point where it becomes legal, finally in the '60s, that we learn the fact that people have the power over you that you give them. Gandhi taught us this. Dr. King taught us this, that you're told that this is what has to happen but only when you do that does it become reality.

When you resist it and when you say, “No, I don’t think it is,” in a forceful but permanent way does it really make any change and I know I’ve used this analogy with students who are perhaps being tyrannized by a teacher. I would simply say the same thing, that people have the power over you that you give them.

If you don’t do what they’re asking and explain – again, give your good reason for it.

[00:42:59]

*Bill Short:* It may not hold up in their court but they don’t – if it makes sense, if there’s a logic behind it, they’ll have to get down from the way they’ve been doing something to a more realistic way. I’m struggling to think of other – another incident that would be in any way remarkable.

*Francesca Davis:* I think it’s absolutely amazing that you seem – whatever situation or social period you’re in that you seem to critically examine your situation.

*Bill Short:* I have always done that because my parents were 40 when I was born and I think growing up in a household with adults. My siblings were that much older. They were pretty much gone to college by the time I was in first grade, so – and my twin died at birth, so there was just me.

The – well, I heard people talking at these – at this level and I went to my father as an eight-year-old angry because we were raising tobacco.

[00:44:02]

*Bill Short:* And I knew that a friend of his who had a cough all the time had finally died of emphysema. I didn’t know what that was but when it was explained to me that it was caused by smoking, I thought this was awful. Why are we doing this?

His comment to me was, “You tell me how I get four of you through college and, you know, we maintain a life like we are and maintain the responsibility for these other families who share this with us. You know, I’ve got all this to manage and if you can help me figure out a way to do this.”

The tobacco – I hate to say it – made the most money of all of it, so for something that he was not exactly happy about. He was caught, as I said, in the system that existed.

Tobacco was a huge industry up until the '80s when it began to turn around and it's what we knew how to do. It's what the equipment and the system was built for that we made our living on. So that wasn't the answer I wanted but that was the answer I got.

[00:45:00]

*Bill Short:*

Yeah, I wasn't – I didn't think of myself as a liberal but I did have causes. My parents were people who were very civic minded. My father resisted the whole idea. Even though he continued to work as a member of the banking community, he didn't work in a bank.

He was on the board of trust or board of finance and because of that he had obligations, social obligations, which meant if you belong to a country club, you could easily have events and occasions and entertain upscale customers.

He would have none of that. He hated country clubs. He hated their exclusivity and Mother was always saying she got put in a corner saying we owe these people an event. You know, we got all these occasions and then we need to have them to something.

So she would team up with some friend of hers whose husband did belong to one of these things and have something, but my father just said categorically, "I think they're wrong. I won't have anything to do with them."

[00:45:58]

*Bill Short:*

So you grow up with people who have these kinds of principles and this kind of work ethic and see your parents' choices. I think you end up having some of those same concepts and, even as a small child, I had my little issues ready to espouse.

When I came to school – came back to work here at this school, we didn't have a recycling program in the '70s, so I started one and we recycle paper. We changed – I say "we." I wasn't the only one but I did start the program.

We changed from glass in the vending machines to aluminum and at that point it made it much easier and safer to start recycling the vending machine stuff and that went on from some time in the late



'70s into the early '80s, and the money, we gave back to the college in the form of textbook scholarships and we planted new trees in the arboretum. The school has a very fine arboretum.

[00:46:58]

*Bill Short:*

It needs to be redefined, but the Lumber Council had given trees to the college for years so that we'd have one of each specimen, and so it was kind of a way to paper to paper and then giving textbook scholarships meant – you know what textbooks cost every semester.

Some students had maxed out their financial aid and this was our way of helping them in one other case. Now that had – the only definition was that they still were in need at whatever point so we could cover the cost of the textbooks.

I still have that kinda sense of, well, to whom much is given, much is expected, so I work with a lot of nonprofits now and, again, in kind of a personal way. It's not a big thing for me to draw attention to it, but I work with about five different groups, helping them fundraise, helping them diversify their market, and they're all in the arts groups.

*Bill Short:*

But we talk very clearly about the issue we're talking about now, about a city that's, what, 60 percent African-American, making sure that the audiences for the programming for these groups is as diverse as possible, to make sure that the boards are as diverse as possible, and that the corporate participation is as diverse as possible and therefore representative of the community it serves.

Video Cut:48:44:07

That's not an easy task. The Memphis Arts Council will tell you for all the programming they do, the numbers are not where they want them to be yet and that's not discouraging. That's simply saying there's plenty left to be done, that can be done.

Schools that are improving and therefore we have arts organizations that are more easily now able to reach students than they were before. That was a problem at one point, and I feel like the same kind of programming and mission that Rhodes has can apply to what goes on in these arts groups and I'm happy to see that it does.

[00:49:00]

*Bill Short:* Again, I think it's part of my farm – to tie this back to the beginning of this discussion, as part of my farm upbringing, I don't go home at 5:00. I don't go home from here sometimes until – you know, it's a 10-hour or 11-hour day. That's a choice I make and on most days I leave here and go directly to work with one of these arts groups because I just continue to want to give back.

Don't have a wife and kids. Feel kinda guilty about wasting all that time just entertaining me. There needs to be something else to show at the end of the day, so that sounds noble but it's kinda what my brother does, what my sister does. We just – that's where we're coming from.

*Joshua Jeffries:* Growing up in or at least going to school in such an interesting period of social change, how did that affect your career choice at all?

*Bill Short:* My career choice?

*Joshua Jeffries:* Mm.

[00:49:55]

*Bill Short:* Well, my first career choice when I graduated from here was teaching and I had planned to teach English at a high school level and I did at Northside near the college here. It's where I've done my student teaching. It was a fairly new school in '72 and it's what I had wanted to do.

I felt like I was so unprepared to do a good job of what I was doing that I left after that first year. It was a tough – I got assigned there by my teacher here for student teaching because she thought I would do well there.

She was a little uncomfortable about assigning some of the students because it was a comprehensive school. There were about 1,000 students there at that time. It was just getting started. Only about 60 of the students or the faculty were white. It was in '72, you know. It was pretty close to some tempestuous times, '68 on, so there was tension.

The first week I was there, there was a bomb threat and a knifing and that would seem mild by contemporary standards maybe, but it was a lot to cope with.

[00:51:00]

*Bill Short:*

Didn't have a car, so I rode the bus and, you know, I'd have to leave early 'cause the Memphis buses run this way and that way before you can get where you're going. I was willing to do all of this because I felt like I was doing something appropriate.

It was 11th grade American English. These students weren't interested in Hawthorne and his 15-line sentences. That had no meaning in their life, so didn't really bother with the principal. I threw out the textbook and we started – they could read Chester Himes.

They could read anything they wanted as long as they were reading and we had to – as my father would always tell us at supper – we had to have improving conversation. He would talk to us at supper about something that had happened in the world that day and we had to know something about it.

My brothers sometimes were pretty good at kind of skirting the issue, but this is what I asked of these students. We had to develop their language skills. We read short stories together. We read magazine articles together.

[00:52:01]

*Bill Short:*

Many of them were reading at a level below 11th grade and my goal was to get them to where they could read the contract they might be signing, to know how to understand the warranty for an appliance, or just simple things that their life would present to them.

To be better prepared as a voter was never anything I stated for them but we talked about that a lot. Some were interested and then some weren't. Every Friday we left reading behind and moved to oral skills where we had a debate and the first time, I divided the class into half.

They had no idea where this was going but I said, "Here's a million dollars. This side is gonna talk about how it's gonna be used for urban programs that we can all talk about. This side is gonna debate how that same money is gonna be used for the space program."

Well, everybody moved over to this side, the urban program. No, no, no, no, no. You can't do that. We have to talk about – we have to take a side that's not popular and learn to debate it.

[00:53:00]

*Bill Short:*

“Mr. Short, I don't want to do that. No, I'm not gonna do that. I don't like that.” I said, “Well, we're gonna get to switch sides.” “Oh, okay.”

So we would – and I let them pick topics after that and they enjoyed having this heated argument which I was supposed to be arbitrating – sometimes got a little outta hand – but they got engaged and I got excited about them using the language skills and getting engaged in a healthy discussion.

The principal didn't like me very much and he – the intercom would pop on and they'd all freeze and look at me like, “Can we keep talking?” I said, “Yes. If he's not happy with what's going on in here, he needs to come tell me.”

[00:54:01]

But these kids got excited about something that I don't think they would have known to get excited about without having this kind of a game to play. There was no – they used to hate these vocabulary tests so we got rid of those. I kept a list at my desk.

We simply talked back and forth and I would use words like “tangible” and “intangible” and we'd talk about that and they would understand it.

*Bill Short:*

And I would just keep working those words into the conversation and eventually I would start hearing those words come back to me.

Video Cut:54:32:10

I was enjoying this. The principal was very irritating and very difficult to work with, but he didn't seem to care about anything but the school board, so most of us faculty had written him off as – this isn't kind – as an Uncle Tom.

He was just there, talking his way through it, interrupting us, telling us somebody had left some keys, you know, in the auditorium. Could you not do that some other time?

We've really gotten to the holy moment where a group of students were polarized into thinking about one thought and working through it and he interrupts with nonsense like that.

So the teaching in the school system was frustrating for me on the level that I didn't think I was ready yet. I decided to go into a waiting period for graduate school by simply getting a job at the public library here. I thought, "You know, the pay's okay." I actually liked it.

[00:54:59]

*Bill Short:*

I got to do more programming with a broad range of people from broad backgrounds, you know, every part of the city. I liked that a lot. A friend of mine and I worked there a year and a half, decided to go to Vanderbilt to graduate school, get a degree in library science, and believe it or not, the first – one of the first jobs that cropped up was here.

So I came here, interviewed, decided it would be fun to work with the staff that I'd known only a few years before. All were still here. They welcomed me and I was gonna stay two years, 'cause I really did want to move up East. That was a goal for me.

Why, I don't know, but I just – that seemed important. Kinda shake the dust of the provincial South and try another part of the country.

Well, you know, I guess you make choices in life. Sometimes they seem to be sort of waiting for you. I have chosen to continue to stay here because of the changes. I mean the job I started with in '75 at Southwestern at Memphis has continued to morph into something now that in 2007 at Rhodes College is profoundly different.

[00:56:04]

*Bill Short:*

The challenge of the work is better. There's more to do. There's more to try to get accomplished. The rate of change is incredible. I mean we can talk about things that are gonna happen this fall that we hadn't even dreamed of last year. So I'm doing what I was doing in that classroom in Northside but in a different way, in an adjunct to the classroom experience.

The faculty-to-student ratio, the 1 to 10 or whatever it is, is the same as when I was a student here, so there's the same sense of the connectivity between us on staff and the teaching faculty.

It's pretty close and if I see a student who's having an extraordinary amount of trouble, I'll quietly alert the teacher to that and with the right questions, the teacher can just learn of this and this is a way to be helpful.

[00:56:58]

*Bill Short:*

Again, here I go again in my one-on-one type thing. This is the individual instruction I can help with here is very meaningful to me. I wouldn't be able to do this in a state school. I wouldn't be able to assess a difficulty on a personal basis like this, whether the student knows I'm helping or whether they're actively seeing us participate in their learning.

But I'm doing what I want to do, which is teach and work with people, and in the advisory and adjunct way that library staff, information service staff get to do. So that was a career choice and it's keeping it down on the farm, too, 'cause I'm still working with a unit of people, you know.

There may have been 25 or 30 people coming and going on the farm every day as laborers, among them the families. We have 29 people on staff here, so I'm kinda back where I was.

[00:57:57]

*Joshua Jeffries:*

In wrapping it up, since you've been in Memphis so long, especially during the Civil Rights Movement and even having, you know, the chance to sort of see that movement at Rhodes College and you're still here, do you think much has changed from that time until now?

*Bill Short:*

I do think much has changed. I think it's easy to believe it hasn't. But, you know, everyone talks about the good old days \_\_\_\_\_.

*Joshua Jeffries:*

Do you think much has changed since your experience in the Civil Rights Movement, especially here at Rhodes College until today?

*Bill Short:*

I do think it's changed. I think it's easy to imagine that it hasn't 'cause everything that we had hoped for in the '60s hasn't happened yet and as Sweet Willie Watson said, some people do have to die.

We have moved on. If a generation is 20 years, we've certainly moved on through a couple of generations and so much more is available now, so many more options.

[00:58:58]

*Bill Short:*

But I don't think the work is ever gonna be finished and I think we find that looking back things looked easier back then in a sense 'cause everything was smaller and we could more easily see the change from no African-American students on campus to some to many more now. I mean that's a visible change.

More students of color of any background and more faculty and administration, but I think that can't be the achievement. That can't be the end of the goal. I think we have made progress. I think we should build on that and see – and learn from it.

Know that what has happened has happened because of the best efforts of a lot of well intended people and it needs to be enjoyed and embraced and we need to keep pushing forward.

*Joshua Jeffries:*

All right. Well, thank you for coming out today and allowing us to have this conversation with you. We've really enjoyed it and hearing all of your stories and experiences.

*Bill Short:*

Well, good.

*Joshua Jeffries:*

So thanks once again.

*Bill Short:*

You're welcome. You're welcome. My pleasure.

[End of Audio]