



## Harmon Wray, 2006

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Interview of Mr. Harmon L. Wray. Interviewed by Daniel Jacobs, of The Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mr. Harmon Wray was a Rhodes student who graduated in 1968, and he is currently the Director of the Vanderbilt Program in Faith and Criminal Justice. In this interview he describes his childhood growing up in Memphis and his early memories of race relations. He also talks about the controversy he was involved in at Rhodes over admitting a black student into the ATO fraternity, his memories of the period following Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination and his decision to become a criminal justice reform activist.

This interview was conducted in 2006 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project. The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

*Moderator:* For the record, do you think you could state your name and when you were born?

*Harmon Wray:* Harmon Wray, I was born here in Memphis, November 10, 1946, early baby boomer.

*Moderator:* And what were your parents' names?

*Harmon Wray:* Celeste Hardiey Wray and Harmon Wray, Jr., or the III, I guess.

*Moderator:* What were their occupations?

*Harmon Wray:* My father spent almost his entire working life after he got out of the Air Force, after World War II, working for Armour Meat Packing Company, and started out on the killing floor and ended up in fairly high management. My mother was a homemaker for part of the time, and then worked for a doctor's office, clerical duties.

*Moderator:* Do you have any memories of your parents, any distinctive memory, or what were your parents like, I guess?

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*Harmon Wray:* Well, my mother's still living. In terms of race stuff, it's interesting. There's kind of an old saw I guess that in the North, white people like the black race but don't really like black people. In the South, white people often like black people but don't like the black race, My mother really was quite liberal and anti-racist and still is. My father was kind of the classic white southern person, very conservative, but had good relationships with individual black people, ~~but~~ But in terms of civil rights and stuff like that he was against all that, just a standard kind of southern white guy of that generation.

*Moderator:* So what was your childhood like growing up in a household where you had – it sounds like your parents kind of had different opinions; did they?

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*Harmon Wray:* Yeah, they were different in a number of ways and that, but there was also some similarities. They both come from small towns in West Tennessee, and neither one of them graduated from college. My father went one year on a football scholarship and then had to quit when his father died to help support his mother and little brother, and so I was the first person to really graduate from college. I'm an only child, so that was it. They came from kind of working-class, kind of and during the course of my growing up years, kind of moved into the middle class. I grew up in a duplex on Breedlove, north of Chelsea in North Memphis, which for many, many years now has been an almost entirely black neighborhood.

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*Harmon Wray:* At that time it was working class white, kind of right on the edge of the black community. Then when I was 11 or 12, we moved out to Cora Lake, which is out Highway 61, kind of a more suburban development. It was not in the city at that time. It's since been annexed, but it was like five miles west of Whitehaven, so I went to school in Whitehaven. But there was always that – and I wasn't aware, and I didn't think about political issues or social issues that much when I was a kid, even for part of... I thought about lots of things, but I didn't keep up with the civil rights movement or even the Vietnam war controversy until my senior year here at Southwestern at that time.

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*Harmon Wray:* That whole political thing wasn't really a very big factor in my growing up years. Then in my later college years and then after I went to Divinity School, after I graduated from here, the stupid things like my hair length and my beard, stuff like that, became big deal for my father.

*Moderator:* Yeah.

*Harmon Wray:* And my mother defended my civil liberties to dress and look like I wanted to. My father I remember one time said about my beard, "Well son, it just ain't natural." I said, "Dad, you mean it's natural to put white foam on your face and risk cutting yourself every

morning when you get up; it's unnatural to let it grow? That's just the opposite. You don't know what the hell you're talking about."  
[Laughing].

*Moderator:* Yeah, yeah.

*Harmon Wray:* So that was kind of a weird thing. You may have been there yourself. I don't know on that issue.

00:04:59

*Moderator:* What were some activities you were involved in as a child, or what was your childhood like?

*Harmon Wray:* When we moved to Coral Lake, I was like 11 or 12. I got into fishing a lot, so I did a lot of fishing by myself on the lake. Before that I was in the Cub Scouts and I played Little League a little bit. I was growing up during the early days of rock and roll and Elvis and Johnnie Cash and ~~Carl Paul~~ Perkins and Roy Orbison and all those guys who were selling records, and I remember listening to that stuff when I was 9, 10, 11, 12, transistor radio under the sheets turned down real low so I wouldn't bother my parents.

And just standard stuff, I mean, when I was in high school I joined an organization called DeMolay, which is a kind of a junior version of the Masons.

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*Harmon Wray:* I didn't realize until I'd been in it a while that my friends, who had kind of recruited me in high school, were really kind of Barry Goldwater conservative Republicans and which I was not, and so I kind of got out of it, because there was some of that kind of stuff in the rituals, so it wasn't a good fit for me. I didn't do any varsity sports or anything like that in high school. I was kind of a brain. I mean I studied all the time when I wasn't fishing, and got my grades up so I could get into a good college, get a scholarship.

*Moderator:* You talked about you moved from North Memphis out to a little bit of the suburbs. I know you were just a kid at the time, but was that a big change for you, going from a more rural place?

*Harmon Wray:* Yeah, it happened just about, close to the onset of puberty.

*Moderator:* Yeah.

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*Harmon Wray:* As an only child – and my parents made the mistake of sending me to ballroom ~~and~~ dancing class just about the time that puberty came along, and it was a bad mistake, because I still don't dance. I refuse to dance; I never learned really ~~to~~ because it was too much all at once, moving, going to ballroom dancing classes and puberty all at the same time, new junior high, then high school. Adolescence is always hell for just about everybody, and it was for me.

*Moderator:* Did the church play a very big role in your childhood?

*Harmon Wray:* Yeah, I was pretty involved in it. When I was a kid in North Memphis, my mother and I went to the southern Baptist church that her parents went to and lived near? It was just right down the street. And then when we moved out to Coral Lake, we went to the nearby Baptist church.

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*Harmon Wray:* We didn't like it, so we went to the Methodist church next door and we liked it better, so we became Methodists. I grew up in that church and then ended up, when I came to Rhodes, kind of minored in Religion and majored in Philosophy and then went on to Seminary at Duke in Theology, and really struggled with religious issues and moral issues a lot under that, from the high school days and college and continue now. I still focus on that kind of stuff in my life and thinking. So that's been a major theme. I went through the typical thing in kind of starting at about a senior in high school and then continuing through most of the college years of being very alienated from organized religion, in particular, Christianity.

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*Harmon Wray:* More aware of the hypocrisy of it than of other characteristics of it and didn't go to church much, but I ended up going to Seminary anyway, because I still was interested in struggling with those issues and with the moral and ethical and social and political issues by that time, that religion impinged upon. And so throughout that senior year here and then the three years at Duke and then continuing after I left there and came to Nashville to graduate study at Vanderbilt. And ever since it never ends; I've been continually engaged with those issues all the time.

*Moderator:* You said earlier that you really didn't become aware of the civil rights movement until you were a senior at Rhodes?

*Harmon Wray:* I was aware of it, but I didn't keep up with it.

*Moderator:* Right, yeah.

*Harmon Wray:* I didn't really pay much attention.

*Moderator:* As a child in high school, what memories do you have race relations and ~~then Christianity~~ Memphis? Do you have any specific?

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*Harmon Wray:* Right. Well, my mother told me a story, which I'm not sure I actually remember it happening or not, it may just through her eyes. When I was real little, she would take me on the bus downtown to go shopping or something, and she had recently read me a children's story called *Little Black Sambo*. I don't know if you're familiar with it or not; it's kind of a classic children's story about a little black African or Indian kid. I don't even remember how it goes, but I was just a little tiny kid. I remember one time she and I got on a bus, a Memphis city bus, and there was this little black boy that was getting on at the same time with his mother, and I apparently said to my mother, "Oh, Mommy, look, there's little black Sambo." It's a racist story, at least that's the way I look at life now.

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*Harmon Wray:* Most people look at life that way, and of course, I was too young to know what it meant. But she tells me about that story, and it helps me now kind of see how embedded I was in the world of segregation and racism, growing up in this town, which ~~it~~ has always seemed to me that white people in Memphis have always been obsessed with race, ~~and~~ more than most places I've ever been.

I remember when I was a kid in North Memphis, there was one little black boy that played with my little white kid group in the neighborhood once or twice, but that was it. Otherwise, it was just all white kids, and of course, school was all white kids, even though we lived right within a block or two of a big black neighborhood.

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Harmon Wray:

And I remember you'd see black folks at the grocery store, at the supermarkets, places like that growing up, but there was never a whole lot of interaction that I recall. Of course, the guy that picked up the garbage every day was African American, but that was early in the morning before we got up, so I never really met him, and what I remember about him is ~~that~~ he would leave a Christmas card, and we were supposed to give a dollar bill or two in a little envelope that he left and leave it on top of the garbage can for him for the next morning around Christmastime, just little stuff like that that I was kind of vaguely aware of. And my grandfather ran a Pillsbury Flour warehouse, and my mother worked there part-time sometimes, and most of the people ~~and~~ staff there were African American, working-class guys.

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Harmon Wray:

So I'd go down there with my mother sometimes and had kind of a superficial kind of connection with some of those guys. My mother would tell me about how when they would get in trouble, my grandfather would bail them out of jail and if they needed money he'd advance them a little bit ~~they didn't want anybody to advance them a bit~~. So it was kind of your standard basically white Southern paternalistic sort of arrangement, as opposed to just blatant outright cruelty. There was that kind of, be nice within the context of the segregated unequal culture, was kind of the way it was.

And Whitehaven High School did not desegregate until the year after I graduated, which was the same year that Southwestern did desegregate, in my freshman year here, two black guys.

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Harmon Wray:

Both of whom I knew, some, during my college years. So that was a new experience even going to school, it was just, even with two African Americans. Of course, none of the faculty were people of color. And my mother and father always kind of taught me the kind of basic human equality, that nobody's any better or worse than anybody else, so that was really good to get that, so that when I did begin to encounter people who were very different from me in terms of race and class and other things, that I had kind of a preparation to kind of meet them on more or less equal terms.

00:15:02

Harmon Wray:

Although, I really have a belief that any white person growing up in America is at some level racist, because we live in a racist

culture, but the difference between us is that some of us try to counter that in our lives, in our thinking, and others just kind of go along with [it?](#). So I don't pretend not to be racist, but I have spent most of my life actively consciously fighting against that part, my culture and myself.

*Moderator:* You talked about your high school wasn't desegregated until the year after you left. I guess you were going to junior high and high school after the Brown vs. Board decision?

*Harmon Wray:* Yes.

*Moderator:* Did you ever talk about that kind of stuff, like integration, with your friends, or did that ever come up?

*Harmon Wray:* I don't remember that ever coming up.

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*Harmon Wray:* It probably did, but it wasn't a big enough thing for me to have any memory of it.

*Moderator:* Yeah, okay.

*Harmon Wray:* And I remember my junior year – no, my senior year in high school was when the John Kennedy assassination took place, in the fall, in November, and I had a general sense that he was a Democrat, ~~he was~~ if not liberal, at least kind of not a segregationist, and that there were things going on. And I remember one of my best friends; we were in study hall sitting around big tables in a great big room doing homework. They announced it over the PA system that the President had just been shot, looks like he might be dead. And I remember my friend, who was sitting across the table.

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*Harmon Wray:* And ~~some~~ other kids in the room started cheering and laughing and smiling and celebrating, and I remember just being really startled and shocked about that, partly because it just seemed so crude and inappropriate, however – even if it had been Barry Goldwater or somebody. But also it just made me realize that my good friend was basically a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary conservative Republican, for whatever level of consciousness he might have had about that stuff. He hated Kennedy, so obviously he was very excited that Kennedy got killed, so I just thought that was – and I



knew enough to know kind of where things were in terms of civil rights stuff and the parties and all that kind of stuff, so that was kind of a vivid memory that touched on the civil rights stuff.

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*Moderator:* You talked about how in your senior year of college at Rhodes, you started getting involved in the Civil Rights movement, but how do you think you got to the point, like when you got to that point? When you first came to Rhodes, what changed?

*Harmon Wray:* I guess what changed is that I got to know this guy that was a sophomore when I was a senior. He was a Memphis town student who was black, and got to be friends. Some of the other people in my fraternity got to be friends with him, and we were ATOs. At some point we got to talking about, would he like to join the fraternity, and he would. There weren't a whole lot of black students there, so he was friends with white guys, and so we thought it was a good idea.

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*Harmon Wray:* And so I remember we had a meeting, and we had a single black ball system. I was an officer in the fraternity, third or fourth – I don't even remember what it was, but the president was a really good friend of mine, who recently died by the way, last May. He had an accident and was killed. We said basically, is there anybody here that would drop a black ball on Larry, and one person raised his hand. He said, "I got a black ball for him." And we said, "Why?" "Because I can't call a nigger my brother," was the answer.

So we basically said, well, ATO is supposedly a Christian fraternity, Alpha ~~and then in~~ the cross and then the Omega is like Jesus, that kind of stuff.

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*Harmon Wray:* It had been set up right after the Civil War with the supposed idea of bringing the races ~~and in~~ the regions back together, ~~after this~~ long struggle. So we said, we really think that your racism or whatever we said about it, is contrary to the principles of the fraternity, and so we can't force you to do this, but we can only ask you respectfully if you would please deactivate so we would be able to carry on the vote and do what all the rest of us want to do. And he voluntarily agreed to do that. We had the vote, unanimous,

he was pledged. Six weeks later, we got the word that the guy that had left had complained to the local alumni guy.

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*Harmon Wray:*

A grown-up guy in the national organization, and that they were forcing us to reinstate him and to have another vote. So we did, and the local alumni guy was here, was at the meeting in the hHouse. The president passed around a little box with black and white marbles in it. This guy dropped a black ball. It came back around; we got one black ball. The president said, "I refuse to accept this vote or any other vote on a single blackball system, because I don't believe in a single veto." Didn't even mention the race. And so the alumni guy said, "Well, it is my duty to relieve you of your office and promote the vice president."; wWho iwas my roommate."

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*Harmon Wray:*

And so he basically said the same thing. And I was either the third or the fourth officer down the line, and all of us said the same thing, and so we all got booted from that office, and by the time the meeting was over, we all – two-thirds of the people decided to resign from the fraternity – maybe not all that day, but within a few days. Of course, by then, Larry didn't want to be an ATO, either. *[Laughing]*.

So the racist guy and a few others that loved being in the fraternity so much, they didn't want to leave, even though they disagreed with that. The rest of us were gone, and pretty soon we kind of did some talking and decided we really didn't believe in the fraternity-sorority system at all and so we were going to try to get it shut down.

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*Harmon Wray:*

So we teamed up with some independents and some people from other fraternities and sororities who were feeling the same way that we were. I remember we had picket lines around Halliburton Tower. Pretty soon the other folks, the pro-Greeks, started having – we had dueling picket lines. The college ended up getting rid of the single black ball system, saying you have to have at least three vetoes to keep anybody from pledging, and making either the local chapters or the national fraternities that they represented – I don't remember which – sign a nbond-discrimination statement that they kept on file, which was kind of a formal sort of official thing.

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*Harmon Wray:* And so we felt like we'd accomplished a little something, but not what we really wanted. And I don't know what has happened since then. I don't know whether the fraternities and sororities are at all integrated or whether there's a black fraternity and a bunch of white fraternities or what has happened – or sororities – I haven't really kept up with it. At that time it was a really big deal on campus for everybody for a period of weeks and months.

*Moderator:* Was anyone hostile to you because of your role in it, or was it pretty, I mean?

*Harmon Wray:* Well, there was tension between us and the guy that had dropped the black ball. There was another guy in the fraternity that was pretty racist, but did not object to pledging this guy.

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*Harmon Wray:* That's all I really remember. I don't remember any confrontations or anything. I remember some arguments with some pro-Greek students, but not anything real heavy. We were just kind of different places. It didn't mean you couldn't be friends, just that you understood this one issue. At that point I had kind of had some ambivalent feelings about the whole rush ~~and~~, blackball and stuff, aside from the race issue, ever since I'd been in. And I had joined as a sophomore, not a freshman, myself, but this just kind of pushed me over the top. I said, I don't want to have anything to do with that kind of exclusivist sort of, elitist, what I saw as elitist kind of way of doing ~~elitist~~ social life.

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*Harmon Wray:* That just didn't make sense to me.

*Moderator:* Yeah.

*Harmon Wray:* I mean, I didn't think that people who disagreed with me were bad people. I don't think they thought I was a bad person because I was different on that. But it was an early kind of, for me, wake-up call about that issue, that touched my life very personally.

*Moderator:* After that, did you start getting more involved in?

*Harmon Wray:* Well, I don't remember the exact sequence. I don't remember whether the sanitation worker strike started before this, or whether this was before that.

*Moderator:* I'm not sure, but the sanitation worker's strike was in the summer of '68; is that correct?

*Harmon Wray:* No, it started in February, so it was in the spring semester, and I think this fraternity thing, it may have been in the fall semester.

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*Moderator:* If ~~R~~Rush was still –

*Harmon Wray:* It may have been in the fall. It would make sense that Rush would have been in the fall, but there may have been some way you could ~~pledge~~ somebody other than during the Rush period at the beginning of the year; I don't know. So I'm a little fuzzy on my memory of the whole thing, but all I know is it was the same school year that the sanitation worker's thing happened, and I didn't get involved in that in any kind of real central way, although there were a few students here who did, white students. Coby Smith, one of the two black students who had desegregated the place, was very, very involved. Have you interviewed him?

*Moderator:* No, we haven't, but hopefully we plan to.

*Harmon Wray:* Yeah, I think he's been pretty ill. I heard when I was down here a few months ago from somebody that knew him, that he was on dialysis or something, and so I encourage you to make tracks. Who knows what will happen. He was of course very involved in the Invaders, which was a very militant younger black organization in the city.

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*Harmon Wray:* That was pushing King and the other people that were supporting the garbage workers, trying to push them to the left in terms of tactics and stuff. Historically a lot of people think that they're the ones that kind of started the violence at the tail end of the first march that King led here around that, which then is why King came back to try to prove that he could still lead a nonviolent march, which is when he got killed.

But the whole garbage workers, so I wasn't as involved as him and even some of the white students here for a while, but then I got really interested in it and talked to friends ~~of mine~~ who had gone to some of the rallies.

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*Harmon Wray:* And I ended up going to one of them when King came back the second time and heard him give his last speech the night before he was killed, the next evening, next afternoon, and was just very moved and very caught up short. I don't know if you've heard or read that speech or seen footage of it, but he had a premonition that he was going to die, or could very well die soon and he talked about that. He talked about how "God has led me to the top of the mountain. I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I know you will get to the Promised Land." And something about, longevity has its place.

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*Harmon Wray:* And I'm not using his words, but that's not what I'm worried about, I'm not worried about anybody, I'm not afraid of anyone, but I just want to do what's right, even if it costs me my life, basically.

So I remember thinking, "What's going on here?" And then of course the next evening he was killed. I remember all that very vividly, and then there were several days when all kinds of stuff happened.

*Moderator:* I guess, on that speech, that rally that you attended, what was that like? Were there a lot of other white people in attendance?

*Harmon Wray:* There weren't a lot. I don't remember how many. I would say a few dozen, but I may be wrong. There were several thousand people, mostly black. There were a few Southwestern professors who had been involved with the union and with the Civil Rights black leaders, ministers.

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*Harmon Wray:* One of them was Carl Walters, who taught religion here. Jim Lanier may have been. I didn't really know him then. I didn't have any classes with him or anything. He was new on the faculty that year. **Michael McClain** was another guy who retired from here a few years ago. That was his first year at Rhodes, too, as it was for Jim. I knew him. There were several, and there were some union people who were white, and then there were students from Memphis State, University of Memphis and a few from here. Apparently one of the ones from here was **Bruce Lindsay**, who became good friends with Bill Clinton and was one of his leading advisors and counselors when he was President.

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*Harmon Wray:* They ~~grew up were~~ in ~~Griffin~~, Arkansas together. Bruce was an ATO who I think quit the fraternity. He was a couple of years behind me, and a few years ago I saw something which he was quoted as remembering that evening, being there and listening to him talk, but I haven't talked to him in many, many years. If you haven't interviewed him, he'd be a good person to try to locate and find. I don't know where he lives now. He may still live in Washington, or he may be back in Arkansas, where he's from.

But I don't remember other people, who was there I just remember feeling like I was in a minority, and I wasn't used to that, and it was kind of exciting and a little nervous about it, and there was high emotion, ~~intentionse~~ feeling. I supported the strike and of course, the opportunity to hear King was a wonderful opportunity.

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*Harmon Wray:* I was excited about that, but I was a little bent out of shape ~~byabout~~ the death stuff that he was kind of alluding to; an incredible speaker. I'd never heard anybody like that since. I heard Barack Obama not long ago, not in as ~~bloated~~ and fraught, ~~that a~~ kind of environment, it was just a political speech. He's got that quality maybe.

So that's pretty much what it was like for me that night. Then a few days later, there was a big memorial march for King, downtown Memphis. I participated in it. It was the first time I'd ever been in a demonstration, any kind of political demonstration except the on-campus thing.

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*Harmon Wray:* And I remember that very vividly. I was scared and there was all these National Guard and police guys with guns lining both sides of the street, and there were TV cameras everywhere. I was thinking they were all focused on me, my father's conservative friends at Armour Meat Packing Company are going to see me and think I'm just completely off the edge, and they're going to give my father shit and he's going to get upset with me, stuff like that.

*Moderator:* What was the atmosphere of the people who were marching? What was it like? Were they marching in silence, or what was it like?

*Harmon Wray:* I don't remember. It was not a noisy kind of thing. My memory is that it was fairly quiet, it was somber, sober.

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*Harmon Wray:*

And there were some speeches. I think we ended at the, maybe at the – I don't know where all the offices, city hall, wherever that was then. There were speeches, and it was all outside, thousands and thousands of people, because the union fight was still going on at that point. It didn't settle for a while, so there were union people and civil rights leaders.

But the other stuff that you might be interested in was what happened here on campus after the assassination. As I recall, it was a few days before spring break was supposed to start, and I think the President, John David Alexander, was out of town when all this was happening, and Jameson Davidson-Jones, the Dean, was kind of in charge.

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*Harmon Wray:*

And the word I got was that he was under a lot of pressure to close the school down early, because there was rebellion and violence and fires going on all over the city for several days. I remember that night after the assassination, or maybe it was the next night or day; I can't remember now. But you could hear the gunshots and the sirens and you could see smoke coming from, over **Broad Street**, which is real close to here of course, that area of town, and that he resisted pressure to shut down the school. He said something like, "This would be an insult to black people to do that, and we're not going to do it."

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*Harmon Wray:*

And he ended up I think closing it down when it was supposed to be, or maybe a day early; I don't remember now. In those few days, there was a curfew, and people were not supposed to be out on the streets unless they were going to work or to the hospital or something. Dean Diehl, who was the Dean of Men – I was a dorm president, and I had third floor of what was then called North Hall, which I think maybe Glassell, something. It was right on University Street. He called all the male dorm presidents into his office and said, I want you to do a weapons check; go room to room and make sure nobody has any weapons. And so I said, nobody's going to have any weapons; this is Southwestern.

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*Harmon Wray:*

I went from one end to the other, and knocked on all the doors and found at least somebody, whether it was both of them or just one



person who were doubled up, and I didn't find any except for one room, which was right across the hall from where I was living. And I knocked on the door, and one of the guys that lived there answered the door, and had been drinking, and he had a couple of fraternity brothers with him. I said, "Dean Diehl's got the dorm presidents going around and checking to make sure nobody has any weapons. You don't have anything, do you?" And he was just drunk enough to admit he did. He said, "Yeah, yeah, we've got some weapons." I said, "What have you got?" He said, "We got some guns, we've got three guns." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, you know, to protect ourselves."

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*Harmon Wray:*

"From what?" He said something about the times, what was going on. I said, "What are you doing with those guns?" He said, "We're driving around with them." I said, "They're not loaded, are they?" He said, "Yeah, they're loaded." I said, "Why are you driving around with loaded guns when there's a curfew and there's all this violence all over the country, including right here, where Martin Luther King just got killed." He said, "We're looking for uppity niggers." And I said, "Well, you know, Dean Diehl wants your guns, and you can either give them to me and let me take them to Dean Diehl or you can give them to Dean Diehl." I think they gave them to me. I don't remember, ~~whether and~~ I took them.

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*Harmon Wray:*

I didn't ever mess with guns. The one time I ever shot a gun was skeet shooting with my father one time. I was scared of guns, I'm still scared of guns. I don't think people should have guns.

So that's one memory. Another memory is that – oh, and another thing is this guy is a prominent lawyer in Memphis now, and his roommate – I was president of the Honor Council that year. His roommate was on the Honor Council with me and is now my doctor in Nashville. One of these days I'm going to ask my doctor if he ever heard that story, because he and I never talked about it. He wasn't there when this happened.

*Moderator:*

Did they get in trouble or anything?

*Harmon Wray:*

I don't know. I don't know what Dean Diehl did with them after that. I'd done my job, and that was it.

Another memory is that – I don't remember which night it was – it was right during that time.



00:41:00

*Harmon Wray:* The National Guard, which was mostly rural, working-class white guys from West Tennessee, obviously many of them very prejudiced and racist, were patrolling the streets. One night real late, right after the time when the guys got the girls back to their dorms if they had a date and were coming back to the dorm to go to bed and some of them had already gone to bed, about that time the National Guard guys decided to take a break. They all park right in front of the dorm on University Street, where it is and started getting out of their jeeps and tanks and trucks, whatever they were.

00:42:01

*Harmon Wray:* They were waving their guns around. Some of them were drunk. Some of the Southwestern guys in the dorm were drunk. Some of them were out in their drawers, and that was all. *[Laughing]*. It was very bizarre, but it was a very volatile situation. And I came out and I don't know whether – maybe the other two floor dorm president were there, too; I don't remember where they were or anything. I don't remember any of the details; I just remember being really afraid that something was going to happen, and ~~in~~ talking to some of the Guard guys, trying to get some of the students back in the dorm, trying to get some of the soldiers to leave and take their break somewhere else, besides right here with a bunch of drunk college students. *[Laughing]*.

*Moderator:* Were they yelling at each other?

*Harmon Wray:* There was some of that. I'm kind of vague on exactly what was going on, but I just remember having a very scary feeling.

00:43:03

*Harmon Wray:* Something really bad could have happened. They eventually went on, and everything was all right. My other really vivid memory from that time was when I first heard about the King shooting. My girlfriend and I, who was a student here, were going out to eat at Morrison's Cafeteria on Union in the hospital area of town, and just as we were pulling into the parking garage under the restaurant at the ground level, we heard a thing come on the radio, a bulletin, that Martin Luther King had just been shot and it looked was in very serious ~~condition~~ and they didn't know whether he was going to live or not. And we drove on in and parked.

00:44:03

*Harmon Wray:* I can't believe we were so stupid. And we parked, got out, took the elevator up to the restaurant, we walked into Morrison's, which was a cafeteria. As we walked in, I became very, very aware in a way I've never been aware before, that all the people eating there were white people and all the people working there were black people, that you saw, serving the line and carrying the trays for you for a quarter tip. And it also occurred to me that we were the only people that knew what had just happened, because everybody else was already there, and it just happened and we just heard it and we just got there. And I had this impulse to get up on the table and try to get everybody's attention and announce what had just happened, and I thought, "Oh, no, you don't want to do that," that no telling what might happen.

00:45:01

*Harmon Wray:* And I remember remembering that incident five years before when my good friend had reacted with glee at the news of the Kennedy assassination in study hall, and I thought, "God knows what might happen if I stood up and announced this in this place, given the racial dynamics of this place," so I didn't. So we went on through the line, ordered our food, got our plates. The black guy took our trays to a table, set them down. I think like a stupid kid, white liberal kid, I gave him two quarters instead of one – of course because I didn't have any money – instead of one quarter, just stupid token B.S.

So we sat there, and I remember sitting there and looking at our food and looking up at each other and looking down at our food and thinking – I don't remember if we said anything. We just got up and left.

00:46:01

*Harmon Wray:* We came back to – I don't know if we drove around a while or if we went back to campus or exactly what, and realized we couldn't eat. Then we heard later that he was dead. Then the next morning, I got word kind of mid-morning, between classes or something, that Coby Smith had had an 8:00 class and had announced in the class with all these white kids that the ~~i~~Invader's first priority in retaliation for what happened was going to be to invade Southwestern and burn, rape, pillage and kill everybody on campus, and that it had just set up this uproar ~~this up for~~, and that pretty soon white students were – this was very, very pre-cell phone.

00:47:06

*Harmon Wray:* Everybody was lining up at the pay phones and the dormitories, calling home to Arkansas, Mississippi and West Tennessee saying, "Mama, mama, black folks are going rape me if I can't get home, kill me," all this stuff.

I knew Coby a little bit, and I knew that he was just playing games and that this campus would not be one of the first targets, if they were going to do something, and I just thought it was sad, funny at the same time, the kind of reaction that he got. I don't know for a fact that he actually said that. I don't know what he said; I wasn't there, but that was kind of the word that went around very quickly.

00:48:02

*Harmon Wray:* And so I don't really have a lot of other recollections of that time, except that when spring break was finally called, my girlfriend and I drove over to North Carolina, because I had been accepted and Duke Divinity School and she had been accepted at University of North Carolina Social Work School. I remember driving all the way over there and then driving – I don't know if you've ever been to Duke. It looks kind of like this, except it's a lot bigger. It's the same kind of stone. It's Gothic architecture. And I remember driving into the Quadrangle, which is a huge kind of central thing, And there were two, 3,000 tents and sleeping bags out all across the yard.

00:49:03

*Harmon Wray:* Come to find out that a lot of the students were on strike and a lot of the faculty were, too, supporting the groundskeepers and food workers and maids in the dorms who were almost all black, who were trying to unionize, and who were being resisted and were going for a higher wage. All that was being resisted by the Administration. Of course, Duke is a very wealthy institution. And so I talked to some of these folks and found out that the Divinity School and some of the faculty and a lot of the students were participating in all this, and I just remember being so excited that this was where I was going to be going; to Divinity School, that this was the kind of campus this was.

00:50:02

*Harmon Wray:* And then stuff happened during my career at Divinity School around the race issue and labor movement stuff, as well as anti-Vietnam war stuff, that I was involved in some of that, so that kind of continued the theme. The other thing that happened after the King assassination was just a couple of months later, Bobby

Kennedy got assassinated. After winning the California primary, they were going after the Democratic nomination for President, and was really campaigning on the same issues that King had been in the last year or two of his life, around tying together the war and civil rights and racial justice and poverty and economic justice, all three together. Both of them were kind of pushing those same three issues.

Although there had been a lot of tension and conflict between the two of them when Kennedy was Attorney General a few years before, you kind of had this sense that they were kind of on the same page.

00:51:11

*Harmon Wray:*

And when he got killed, right at the point where it looked like he was going to get the nomination over Humphrey, it was just like devastating. Then a couple of months after that is when they had the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where Humphrey basically kowtowed to Johnson to get Johnson's support for the nomination, and they got to Mayor Daley to kind of stage-manage things and to make sure Humphrey got the nomination, and McCarthy didn't. Of course, Kennedy was dead by then. And then there were all the ~~police~~ riots and all the peace demonstrators got the hell beat out of them.

00:52:00

*Harmon Wray:*

And all on television, everybody saw it. By then, I had, just in the course of a few months, I had begun to see myself as a very radical political activist and around all those issues, poverty, race, the war, violence, and I still am. I've been living in that place ever since, and it all was around that fraternity stuff and the sanitation strike and the King assassination.

And one other thing that happened at Rhodes, which is not related to the race issue, but which was a third piece which I'll just tell you briefly. As Honor Council President, I had participated in trials of women students who had gotten somebody to call the dorm mother and say, this is Suzie's mother.

00:53:09

*Harmon Wray:*

And town student, Sallie's going to be spending the night out at our house, with her friend Suzie, and so she would sign out for that, and if she went out and spent the night with her boyfriend and somebody tattled on her, she was subject to getting tried and to

getting kicked out of school. Of course, the guys didn't have to do any of that. We could do anything we wanted to.

Then the other thing was Compulsory Chapel. If you signed up and said that you were going to Chapel on a particular day and then you left, it was an Honor code violation ~~Council abolished~~. And myself and two other people on the Honor Council got to talking about those two things and decided, this was the heyday of student power.

00:54:00

*Harmon Wray:*

We decided that the Administration was using us as kind of to make it look like they believed in student power, but they were using us to enforce their sexual morality and their religious beliefs in those two cases, and that we didn't appreciate that. And we talked to the other people on the Council and got pretty much of a consensus of everybody, that those were both problems. So I made an appointment with the President and Dean Jones and the Dean of Men and Dean of Women, and we all had a meeting, and we articulated our concerns and said we would no longer hold trials for people that were turned in for either one of those offenses.

I remember the President looking at the Deans, then looking back at me and saying, "You're right. You're absolutely right; we're going to have to change both of those things."

00:55:08

*Harmon Wray:*

And so my reaction to that was, I'm a born political organizer. I can do this; this is easy. So those three – the Honor Council thing, the fraternity thing and the sanitation worker's strike and the assassination, all took place within just a very few months of each other, and it was just at that point in my life when I was getting ready to graduate from college in my hometown, where I'd lived here all my life and go somewhere else and be in graduate school. Just the coming together of all this gave me a really strong sense of calling and I was very quickly politicized and started taking politics and stuff like that very, very seriously for the first time.

00:56:03

*Harmon Wray:*

And I kind of got politicized and depressed at the same time, because the campus stuff is pretty good. We got some headway on that stuff, but the larger world was kind of all going to hell. King's dead; Kennedy's dead, Humphrey's got the nomination. The first time I could vote, I couldn't even bring myself to vote for

President, and so I didn't vote at all. I had a student deferment from the draft and a Divinity deferment, and then they instituted a lottery system, and you drew numbers, and I was fortunate enough to get a high number. Although I was worried for a while, I never got close to having to deal with the draft issues firsthand.

But all that stuff was happening at the same time, and they all fit together in my mind and in other people's minds.

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*Harmon Wray:* And so I was – that spring of 1968 probably other than when I was in my early childhood, which is when you get shaped as whoever you're going to be – other than that, that year, those few months actually, were probably the most important moment in my life for shaping the way I've lived my life ever since and what I believe in and who I am, for better or worse.

*Moderator:* I'm just interested in this, but especially after the Martin Luther King, after he was assassinated and with the riots going on in the city and you're talking about you made this change, how did your view of Memphis change? When you came back, did you see the city differently and the relations in the city differently between the races?

00:58:08

*Harmon Wray:* Yeah, yeah. It all kind of fell into place. I said a while ago that my perception is that white people in Memphis have always been just ~~been~~-obsessed with race. I think that might be changing some recent years; I hope so, but it really kind of made things come together for me in terms of understanding the city. I didn't like Memphis for a long time after that. In more recent years I've liked it better when I've come back to visit. My mother still lives here. But it really affected my view of Memphis. Memphis is famous for two things: Elvis and the King assassination, both kings.

00:59:04

*Harmon Wray:* And Elvis, you know, as a human being was pretty screwed up, and after the first couple of years, I never cared that much for his music. The first couple of years were just fantastic. Historically, he's important because he brought black and white together artistically, culturally in a lot of ways during the same period of time that; the civil rights movement was beginning. It's just been interesting to think g-about Memphis's identity around those two figures and what that means historically.

*Moderator:* Could you maybe just talk a little bit more about how after that change I guess the career that you've gone into, just how those three events affected the rest of your life?

00:60:05

[Crosstalk]

*Harmon Wray:* Well, I've spent most of my adult life in criminal justice advocacy efficacy and prison ministry and education around criminal justice issues, in writing and speaking. And all that that's race and class and violence, which are the three themes that I've been working on ever since that time, are the issues around criminal justice work in this country and in the sSouth, particularly. Religion, which is the way I come at all this, Christianity, from kind of a radical version of Christianity, liberation Liberation, theology Theology kind of approach, is very implicated in all three of those areas and in the way it interfaces with criminal justice. So it's all continuous; it's all very much a continuation of those themes.

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*Harmon Wray:* That first converged in my life and in the larger life in the city in this campus during those years, or during that year, during that semester. So I look back on that as being the place where my life kind of began to take shape and the way that I – not particularly that I was going to do criminal justice, but that whatever I did, it would be within the context of those issues.

*Moderator:* Is there anything else important that you feel like you should add?

*Harmon Wray:* Just that I'm really glad that you all did this project, and I look forward to seeing some of it sometime, some of the other stuff, the other people you're talking with. I hope it's a really rich experience for you and other students that are involved in this. I think you're really creating something that will be important for a lot of people for so many years, so thanks.

*Moderator:* Well, thank you very much for sharing your story with us. I'm sorry I kept you so long.

00:62:1804

*Harmon Wray:* No, that's all right.

*Moderator:* You've been so interesting, so thank you very much.

Harmon Wray: Thank you, enjoyed it.

00:62:25

[End of Audio]