

Oral History Project

Audrey Hendricks

June 1, 1995

Code: Huntley [H], Hendricks, [HE]

H: This is an interview with Audrey Faye Hendricks for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute's Oral History Project. I am Dr. Horace Huntley. We are at Miles College. Today is June 1, 1995.

Welcome, Ms. Hendricks.

HE: Thank you.

H: Thank for taking time out of your schedule to come and sit with us today. I would just want to start by asking you some general kinds of questions about your family. Where are your parents from? Are they originally from Birmingham?

HE: My mother is from Birmingham -- is a native Birminghamian. My father is a native of Boligee, Alabama which is in Greene County.

H: I see. Where were you born?

HE: I was born in Birmingham.

H: How many brothers and sisters are there?

HE: There are two of us. I am the oldest of two girls.

H: Tell me just a bit about the education of your parents. How much schooling did they have.

HE: My mother finished Booker T. Washington Business College and my father did not complete elementary school, being in a rural township.

H: What were their occupations?

HE: My father was a laborer. He worked for Jim Dandy at the time and my mother worked for Alexander and Company with a black insurance company at that time doing clerical kinds of things.

H: Tell me about your education. Where did you start school? Did you start at Center Street?

HE: I started at Center Street. I went there for four years. And after the four years I went to

private school, to Our Lady of Fatima. After desegregation I went to Ramsay High School and I left Birmingham in '71 and went to Bishop College in Dallas, Texas. I came back to Birmingham for awhile in the '80s and went to UAB and took some courses towards my Masters.

H: So you went to Fatima?

HE: Yes.

H: Was that high school?

HE: Our Lady of Fatima was an elementary school. It was Immaculata initially. And Immaculata was no more and it ended up being an elementary school and the children who were at Our Lady of Fatima on 14th Street South at that time were then moved down to what was known then as Immaculata High School.

H: Right.

HE: And that is where I started with them for the last -- well, I should say 5th through 8th grade.

H: Describe to me what it was like going to Ramsay High School. What year did you go to Ramsay?

HE: I started there in '71. When I went to Ramsay High School it was immediately right after desegregation, well, whenever they decided to start letting Black children go to high school. I remember for the first two weeks, we all sat in the auditorium because they didn't quite know what to do with us.

H: You mean the Black children sat in the auditorium?

HE: Yes. Ramsay had it set up at that time where children before the school term would end, say like now in May of '95, they would have already elected what courses they would take for the upcoming fall term. So, what they had to do was to get us situated in classes and I guess basically find out what do we do with these children that have just shown up here based on what the laws are now.

H: Today, in order to get into Ramsay you have to take a test.

HE: Yes.

H: Was there a test at that time?

HE: No. it was a public school.

HE: From my understanding I think at that time it was, it's an alternative school now, and I think what they have done, is gone back to the concept that they had then. During the times that I was there I went to school with the Bruno's children, the Salem's children, that own the restaurants, so I knew those children.

H: Well, how were you accepted in those years that you were at Ramsay? In the initial stages?

HE: In the initial stage of it, we had to kind of -- us as Black children, had to kind of bind together as friends. It was very difficult. There was some hatred among children. Whites against Blacks and vice versa. I guess, well, some of us, I witnessed some fights of the two races. Some name calling. Not a whole lot, but just little things that would happen during the school years. But as my graduation got closer it got a little bit better by the fourth year.

H: Ramsay was probably desegregated maybe as early as '66 or so? Is that right '66 or '67? So you were not the first class were you?

HE: I was not the first class that I am aware of.

H: But all of the Black kids were placed in the auditorium at the beginning of the year?

HE: Yes. In '71.

H: That's very interesting. What do you remember most about Ramsay?

HE: I think the thing that I remember most about Ramsay again is the friendships, the togetherness that we had.

H: Between the Blacks and the Whites?

HE: Primarily Blacks and Blacks. I think that for Blacks and Whites it gave me an appreciation or understanding I guess of dealing with another culture. Prior to that I had been based in just my culture. And in going to Ramsay it helped me understand some things that are just innate in people and cultures that you may not have known prior to mixing with other races.

H: Like what, for instance?

HE: Well, one thing I think was the temperature. Something as simple as that. We tend, in the winter, to be very cold natured and want to put on a lot of clothes. I found that we would have big arguments about, "Let the window down." The Whites would always say, "It's too hot in here." And we would always think it would be comfortable. A lot of times you didn't have boys that would just physically lash out and that kind of thing at Black girls to show playfulness at that time.

H: So there were differences, cultural differences?

HE: Yes.

H: Tell me a bit about the community that you lived in. What community did you live in?

HE: I lived in Titusville, is what they call that area, which is the southwest side off of 6th Avenue South and Center Street.

H: How would you describe the community?

HE: The community was mixed. We had school teachers. We had business persons. I lived across the street from Paul Harris who worked for Protective Industrial for years. Some doctors in the community and general laborers. We had people that worked at ACIPICO and plants like that.

H: So you mean mixed in terms of economic status?

HE: Yes.

H: Racial make-up?

HE: It was predominately Black.

H: Was it predominately Black or all Black?

HE: 100 percent.

H: What do you remember in terms of recreation in the community?

HE: The only recreation that we had at that time was Memorial Park which was not very far from where I lived.

H: What was your perception of your community's relationship to the Birmingham Police Department?

HE: None really. If they were breaking in, you would see policemen and something of that nature. And that was very rare that anything would happen. But, nothing where they just came to the community and harassing about it to my recollection.

H: What did you do after high school?

HE: I left Birmingham and moved to Dallas, Texas and went to college there for four years.

H: To what school?

HE: Bishop College.

H: And after college did you come back to Birmingham?

HE: No. I lived in Dallas for the next four years and I worked in mental health for Dallas County Mental Health and Retardation and worked with children there with emotional problems in a residential setting.

H: Why did you decide to come back to Birmingham?

HE: Well, I decided that I had been there long enough and I just wanted to kind of come back home -- just drew me back home after a while.

H: The attraction of home?

HE: Yes.

H: Tell me a little about your involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. How and why did you get involved in the Civil Rights Movement?

HE: Well, for me it was no way for me not to really be involved. My parents were involved from the point that I could remember. My mother was assistant secretary of the Alabama Christian Movement. My mother had gone to jail for riding on the bus. My church was involved. It was just no way around it. You were there and just a part of it, so that's how I got involved.

H: So you were simply surrounded by it?

HE: Yes.

H: And you were in fact a child of the Movement I would say?

HE: Yes. And some people, sometimes when you look on the media and talk shows that they have now where they have people talk about what kind of people that came through your home. It wasn't rare for me to see Fred Shuttlesworth, you know, to come to my home. It wasn't rare for Dr. King to maybe come by sometimes. So those people I remember as a child.

H: What was that like to be in the presence of Shuttlesworth or King, people that were in the news an awful lot?

HE: Well, at that age, you know, it's just someone coming by. Again, being a child you don't really understand until like now. Like, "Wow, these people I knew and were in my home."

H: You attended the mass meetings?

HE: Yes.

H: Can you describe to me what the typical mass meeting was like from the perspective of a child? What age are we talking about? How old were you when you were first arrested?

HE: When I was finally arrested, I was eight years old. So from the inception I had been in the

Movement all the time. Whenever they began, as far as I know, when they began mass meetings, I was there because of my mother and father. I don't ever remember a time we were not in the meeting, whether or not -- initially we would start it at 16th Street from what I could remember. And later, as it grew, they ended up having two meetings. Meetings where they had adults and then meetings where they had the children.

H: You mean mass meetings, where you would have a meeting for the adults and a meeting for the children?

HE: Yes. Because we had outgrown 16th Street so there would end up being two places. I remember Andy Young and some of them being part of the mass meetings where the younger people would be and I think in my mind it had to be because it was just so many people and we had packed 16th Street out. And so the children became involved and that's how we ended up there. But the meetings themselves were, in my mind from what I can remember, was energy. It was very organized. People responded. I remember times when they would say, "If we are going to march tomorrow, if you have any weapons, come down and put them on the table." And there would be people to come down and put knives on the table and those kinds of things. So it was great impact.

H: Were these younger people?

HE: Different ages. Depending upon which meeting that all would go to.

H: So you could actually attend either meeting, the adult meeting or the children's meeting?

HE: Yes.

H: How were the two meetings different?

HE: There was not any difference in the meetings. The same kind of thing where there was singing, there was strategies. They talked about what would happen if you are going to march. Well, not what would happen, but if you had decided that you were going to march, that you did not need to take weapons. This is a non-violent organization and we want, they stressed that very strongly. That this is non-violence involved in it.

H: There were, I know in the adult meetings, there were many testimonies that were given about

what people were experiencing. Did you have the same kind of testimony?

HE: Yes.

H: Were these done by younger people?

HE: Teenagers primarily. People may have been high school or college age persons at that time. Or sometimes adults. It would be mingled. But you would find that children with teens and young adults and maybe my age would be more prone to draw to that church where they were organized there. But you could go to either one. It was not separate, per se.

H: It was not a restrictive bunch?

HE: Right.

H: Were Birmingham police present at the meetings?

HE: If they were, they were not dressed in their uniform for me to know that there were police around.

H: But if they were, they would have been White. So were there Whites in the meetings?

HE: Not that I ever remember seeing.

H: You were arrested?

HE: I was arrested.

H: What were the circumstances of your arrest?

HE: Well, I had gone to a mass meeting one particular night and when I went home I just told my mother and father that there was something that I wanted to do and they told me okay.

H: You told them that you wanted to go to jail?

HE: Yes.

H: And they agreed?

HE: They agreed.

H: So what happened? Where were you?

HE: When I told my parents?

H: No. I assume you were at home when you told your parents and that was the night after --

HE: One of the mass meetings. And during the day I went to see my grandparents my mother's side, and my grandparents on my father's side and whoever was there would tell me I was going to jail. I remember telling the teacher. We went by the school and she cried.

H: Oh, you mean, you left home that morning and you went to the school?

HE: Yes. I was just kind of telling people what I was going to do. And I remember the teacher crying about it. You know, I think she was just touched about the whole thing.

H: Do you remember the teacher?

HE: A Miss B. P. Wills.

H: Miss B. P. Wills. What grade were you in?

HE: I would have been, at that time, in the 3rd grade or the 4th grade.

H: How long were you in jail?

HE: Two weeks.

H: Two weeks?

HE: Yes.

H: And you were eight?

HE: Yes. Eight years old.

H: Can you describe to me what happened during the arrest? Were you marching?

HE: We marched from 16th Street and I think that we got to the next block where Booker T. Washington and WENN radio is now. We got half-way the block and they put us in the paddy wagon and they took us to juvenile hall. And my remembrance now, that apparently right after I was arrested there must have been the big thrust when so many other people were arrested and they ended up at the fairgrounds. Because you would get news sometimes that there's no more room here and they are now putting people out at the fairgrounds because there is no other jails, they were all filled. But they arrested me and I went in the paddy wagon. The first day we went into this room that looked like a classroom and we, the children, all of a sudden there for awhile. And there was not any harassment or anything of any people there. I remember later on, I don't know if it was the same day or some days later, I went into maybe a conference room where there were Whites that was asking questions about the movement. And in my mind I was wondering whether or not they were trying to find out was anything communistic in the Movement.

H: Were these policemen?

HE: They did not have on uniforms. They were plainclothes people. And they would ask what went on in the meetings. What kinds of things do they talk about and we all responded that we talked about non-violence and discrimination and that kind of thing. And whether or not that they thought that they were telling us anything about overthrowing the government and of course, not. And that was about it. The rest of the time, you were just there.

H: Were you inside or outside?

HE: I was inside. Where we slept at night and during the day, it was like a dormitory setting. The rooms had bunk beds and it was one on top of the other. It may have been where it could, and I am estimating, maybe 15-20 people tops.

H: Were these all girls in one area?

HE: All girls.

H: And the boys in another area?

HE: Exactly, yes.

H: What did you do during the day?

HE: During the day we would go outside maybe to the -- they had like a recreational area outside. There was no classes per se to keep up any of your academics. So you just were there basically.

H: So the morning that you had decided to be arrested, your parents took you to school?

HE: Right. To let Miss Wills know.

H: And then they took you down to the church?

HE: Well, we went by my family's home to let them know. And then we went to the church.

H: What was your family's reaction?

HE: Well, my father's family, brothers were all really involved in the Movement. Well, not all, but a large majority of them were involved, so it was like, "Okay, we are very proud of you." So there was no one that was upset negatively about it.

H: Were there others of your age there, at the time that you were arrested?

HE: I think that there were a few others. I didn't know them personally, but I understand from reading, that there were others that may have been as young as I was.

H: What does an eight year old think about when they are in jail for two weeks?

HE: At that time, I thought I was just part of the cause. That I was helping the cause. In my mind I could understand injustice and I think that I could stand that because of the recollection of the maybe the first meeting that made an impact to me. It was, I think Shelley Stewart at that time was at the meeting and they were talking. You could just feel the people's emotions. I guess

that's what you know, you could just tell this person is serious about this. This is something going on.

H: What do you remember about Shelley Stewart?

HE: He was just talking about the injustices and how we should not be treated the way that we were. And after they talked for awhile then they had a demonstration. This elderly man was part of the demonstration and I witnessed a dog attacking him and it was like, "Oh, my God."

H: So you did see the dogs?

HE: Yes. Yes.

H: And the water hoses?

HE: I did not ever see the water hoses. That was the one thing that I remember.

H: How did that impact you?

HE: I thought that it was awful at the time for, in my mind, I had witnessed the beginning where something I was just talking to people. Then you go out and all you want to do is march and it's something that's non-violent and I didn't understand about the permits of course, as a child then. But I didn't see anything wrong as a child to be able to march in a group to say I don't like what is going on and then you going to put a dog on me.

H: How near was the dog to you physically?

HE: I wasn't very close. I was close enough. Maybe I would say half a block.

H: The man was not near you, you just saw it from a distance?

HE: Yes. I saw it from a distance.

H: That's really amazing to have a child talk about it, you know, talk about it from the perspective of a child of six to eight years old and how in fact that impacted you at the time. Did that have anything to do with the way that you perceived White people as a result of your participation in

the movement?

HE: You mean negatively?

H: Yes.

HE: No. Not at the time it did not. I guess in a child's mind, you don't really, you have not experienced the kind of injustices that my parents probably had. But just the incident with the gentlemen, I could understand that that was wrong.

H: Were you aware of the "colored" fountains or the boards on the buses or any of those things that were just vividly displayed?

HE: No. Not vividly. I don't remember the boards on the buses. I do remember the fountains. When we would shop sometime, I would go with my grandmother to shop. But I didn't ever have any incidents or any encounters I guess.

H: What church were you a member of?

HE: New Pilgrim Baptist Church.

H: And New Pilgrim, of course, was very actively involved. Your pastor was very involved. You your family, in fact. I know your mother and father.

HE: And my father had some brothers that were arrested as well. A couple of brothers.

H: As you said, you had no other alternative. Tell me, after this is over, after you are released from jail, what was the reception when you returned to school, do you remember?

HE: It had to have been fine. I don't remember anybody teasing me, if that's what you mean, or giving me a hard time about it. Life just continued as it was before I went to jail. I had no problems with my peers or the teachers.

H: Did they look at you as a hero or a shero?

HE: I don't think that they really understood.

H: The teacher that cried. Do you remember after you returned, anything about her?

HE: No. Not anything. I think that at the time she had pretty much expressed in her tears.

H: The Movement continued of course after the demonstrations and in September of '63, the year that you were arrested, of course, the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church took place. Do you remember that?

HE: Yes.

H: What do you remember about it?

HE: I remember Denise McNair.

H: Oh, you knew her.

H: Yes.

H: What were the emotions of the times when that happened?

HE: I was shocked. She was a year older than I was.

H: Did she go to Center Street?

HE: Yes. She went to Center Street. Her mother was a teacher at Center Street at that time. I remember after her death, I think that they had the polio vaccines that they were giving in the sugar cubes and you had to go to Center Street to get them and after her death, I remember them bringing her to the school to get her, I guess the sugar cubes and how the people would have to just kind of hold her up, she was just that distraught over losing her child. I think that at that time, Denise may have been the only child.

H: You mean the mother?

HE: The mother. Denise's mother. It may have been the only child at that time that she had. I remember that as a child.

H: Turbulent times. Were you involved after that? As you went on into junior high school and high school were you involved at all in any of the Movement?

HE: Not particularly. There was one guy that went to Ramsay with me whose sister sang in the Alabama Christian Movement Choir and I remember him because they were rehearsing. We would see each other. My father was in the choir as well as his sister and we would see each other there and he was really the only person that I really knew other than some of my friends that grew up in the neighborhood that we would talk alot. Because we had that common bond with the Movement of any of the other friends that I had.

H: What accomplishments did you see as a child that took place as a result of the Movement?

HE: I think the biggest accomplishments were at the beginning were jobs for adults from that. I know that my mother was able to leave Alexander and Company and work for the federal government which she would have not been able to prior to the demonstrations. In my -- just in the community itself, you could see people moving up and being able to have better jobs. Being able to go to the restaurants that you had never been able to go to before that you could only kind of look out, I guess, outside through the window. The school, for me. Being able to go to Ramsay whereas it had not been available to me and anybody that wanted to go. So, just an abundance of things that had not been before. And I think that it has helped relationships for Blacks and Whites in some aspects.

H: When you were away from Birmingham and you were meeting from other people and they found out you were from Birmingham, what were their reactions?

HE: I guess in some instances the same way that it is now when you say that you are from the South. The people have these preconceived notions about everybody lives in shotgun houses or we are on the farm. I don't think at that time that a lot of people were into the history of Birmingham. They didn't ask me a lot of questions about, you know, how you were involved, what did you all do.

H: They did not ask you any questions about it?

HE: No.

H: Were there others at Bishop from Birmingham or others in Dallas?

HE: No. Just myself.

HE: At that time that I knew. I met people later that were from there but no one that I knew prior to going.

H: Well, did you have any difficulties in returning to Birmingham? I know many people who have left Birmingham will say, "Well, they left Birmingham and they'd never come back." Was that ever a problem for you?

HE: No. Not at all.

H: One of the things that sort of strikes me is that I always considered myself coming back to Birmingham eventually. Even during the days of segregation, I said that I was going to leave and I was going to come back. But as I told people that I was coming back, they would always say, "Why? Why are you going back to Birmingham?" Did that happen at all to you?

HE: No. Not at all.

H: No one questioned why you would --

HE: Why would I go back to Birmingham?

H: Yes.

HE: None.

H: That's interesting. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we have not dealt with in relationship to your participation and how you felt as a child and the kinds of things that you were involved in and how you related to other people. Or even how it is -- that experience impacted upon your life long term?

HE: The only other thing that I did not talk about that I did think about as I was sitting here and there were -- we always talk about the power, we always talked about what the Whites did not do. But there were people that did do things to help and assist. And I remember one year when it was near Christmas time and I think there must have been a boycott going on of the stores

where they were not to buy things, I know people were shipping toys down to Birmingham.

H: Shipping from?

HE: From other states.

HE: So the children could have toys. And I remember as a child to see all these toys and they came to my home, some of the things did and to have to get rid of them, of course, because you couldn't keep them all for yourself. But you know, just to know that there were people who did care, who were not Black. Who were white people who were with the cause.

H: So people were sending toys to your address?

HE: Yes.

H: And then your parents had to distribute them to other children?

HE: Yes. Because of the boycott and they wanted children to have a Christmas. And I guess that the overall picture, well I just see people, just Black people in general walking down the street in their suits and ties and you kind of say, "Hum, I had a part in that."

H: Well, I certainly do appreciate you taking the time out today and come out and talk with us because your perspective from that tender age, is so vitally important for what we are attempting to do. And we will review this and we may want to talk with you again. Thank you again.

HE: Alright. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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