

Oral History Collection

John Fullinwider

Interviewers: W. Marvin Dulaney and Alfred L. Roberts

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Place of interview: Dallas, Texas

Dr. Dulaney: Okay. John will you start by telling us a little bit about where you were born and when you came to Dallas [Texas], some of your background?

Mr. Fullinwider: Well I was born in Dallas. I've lived here pretty much my whole life. I lived in Austin [Texas] when I went to university for six years and then I came back here. So I've been a Dallas-ite pretty much my

whole life. My family was insurance salesmen, so they would hold on to the lower rungs of the middle class there as best they could. I went to Dallas public schools and then went to the University of Texas at Austin. Dropped out, came back and went El Centro [Community College, Dallas] for a year. And then went back and graduated from UT [University of Texas].

Dulaney: Let me mark this tape. We are interviewing John Fullinwider on September 21, 2011. We're at ICDC [Innercity Community Development Corporation] in Dallas, Texas. Tell us a little bit about what you did when you were in college. What was your major?

Fullinwider: I was an English major. English and Latin, so when I graduated, of course, I didn't have any way to make a living except become a teacher. DISD [Dallas Independent School District] came and recruited at UT and I remember sitting there. Most of the applicants didn't look like me and I thought, 'Oh man, I'll never get a job here.' And I swear to God I was sitting there thinking, 'I wish I could get--at least just get an interview, so I could practice my interview skills.' But, I did get an interview

and I got hired that day. And they told me later I was the only one that got hired that day. So I came up here and worked in the east Oak Cliff sub-district starting in January 1977. I was at a school that at that time was called the South Oak Cliff Annex. But today it's Sarah Zumwalt [Middle School]. That experience probably radicalized me more than anything to be honest. Overcrowded classes. The books were hand-me-downs from my own high school seven years previously. Conditions just really weren't very good. We what was called a Youth Action Center at time which actually meant a uniformed armed Dallas police officers walking the building. That's really what led me into community organizing. I remember thinking, 'I'm going to have to move out here and start something or I'm going to have to dig in where I live and start something.' Actually I did neither. I had a girlfriend in Austin, so I moved back to Austin for a while. And then I came back the following year and moved into east Dallas over by East Grand Shopping Center. There I met Charlie Young and a group of community--a community organizing group called The Bois d'Arc Patriots. That was a really good group for me to meet. It was

a small band really of protestors. Really creative protestors. Of course a lot of times you're speaking to the public through the media, and so to get the attention of the media you've got to use direct action or dramatic confrontation helps. Charlie Young, he was kind of famous at the time for opening a box of cockroaches at city hall and throwing them sort of at the city council. [Dulaney laughs] And this was to demonstrate our concern about unhealthy living conditions in apartments in east Dallas. All of that was a real eye-opener for me. The thing that I did for the Patriots mainly was research. I began to research community issues and my method was I would get anecdotal evidence or personal testimony from people that--like going door to door [asking], "How did you end up in this neighborhood?" or "Where did you live before?" And then I would try to run down the policy implications of what they told me. So for instance, there is a neighborhood east of downtown, one of the first gentrified neighborhoods called Bryan Place. We knew a lot of people that lived in the area that got cleared for Bryan Place. So they said, "I used to live over on Pecos Street and then they came and told me my house was sub-

standard and I'd have to pay so much to fix it up or I could sell it and so I went ahead and sold it."

(5:00) As I began to uncover, looking for policy trends that made that possible-made mass displacement possible, that led us into certain directions as organizers and activists. So that was my first encounter with community organizing and protests and so forth. When I was in college in Austin I spent one semester driving for the Black Panthers [Free] Breakfast for [School] Children Program. We had a car so we'd go to east Austin and pick kids up and take them to the Panther thing. Everybody'd get scrambled eggs and Frosted Flakes, you know. They had a pretty active chapter. That would have been 1970. They had a pretty active chapter down there. That was actually my first thing I did that you could say was an activist type of thing.

Dulaney: Can I take you back?

Fullinwider: Yep.

Dulaney: Because we are definitely going to deal with some of these issues in a substantial way. What was it like growing up in Dallas?

Fullinwider: Well, growing up in Dallas--people might not believe it now. They think everything's so progressive here, but Dallas has been right-wing heaven forever. I remember Charles Hunter, who passed away just this past year, a professor at Bishop College. He used to call Dallas, "The biggest little town in Texas". He'd call it, "The smallest big city in Texas" or "The biggest left-over plantation". That's how he described it. My mom's friends were like active [Barry] Goldwater people, you know, 1964. They were all republicans, of course. We definitely had something to rebel against. And we did of course. I was sixteen years old in 1968 and I remember being so inspired and moved by the events of that year. I remember my mom in particular saying--this was a little bit earlier than that, but I remember my mom when Dr. King won the [Nobel] Peace Prize. We were in our kitchen listening to the radio and she said, "Oh man, he's the one making all that trouble. It's not peace." I remember thinking, 'Boy, anybody that upsets my mom like this, I want to be just like them.' [Dulaney laughs] It was easy for me in that time to--all of the family politics mirrored the politics around us. I don't think I'm the only one

that that happened to. So that sort of planted the seed of wanting to be an activist. Our elementary school was segregated completely. When I went to junior high which was Edward H. Cary Junior High-- at that time it was seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. Eighth grade was integrated. And the kids came mainly from Longfellow--around Longfellow which was over in the Inwood Road area. They didn't come though on school buses. They didn't have--this was way before we had a busing order. They just came on the city bus. I wouldn't say the social life of the students was integrated, but it was--I don't remember it as being anything, you know. I remember thinking at the time, 'This works'. But that could have been a rare experience within the district. But this was in 1966.

Dulaney: What high school did you go to?

Fullinwider: Thomas Jefferson High School.

Dulaney: Was it integrated?

Fullinwider: Yes, it was. It was. But at the time it was like the Thomas Jefferson Rebels, you know. The flag was the old Confederate flag and the mascot looked like a

Confederate soldier, so I'm sure there was some discomfort there for the black kids that went there. I don't remember any major conflicts though really. I really don't. I do remember I thought the teachers had more problems with it than we did. They didn't seem to--the older ones in particular I didn't--the faculty wasn't integrated. I remember the faculty was mainly white. I don't remember having a black teacher. I remember one of the things I did later in life was start the East Dallas Community School which is a Montessori school for kids in east Dallas, working class and poor kids. And I remember when we were hiring we hired several African-American educators to work with us. And I remember thinking at the time, 'My own kids are going to this school' and I remember thinking, 'I want them to see black people in positions of authority. I want that to be natural for them.' We wanted that for our own kids, but we wanted it for the school itself. So that was something I remember pretty clearly that I never had any black teachers. But when I was student teaching in Austin my mentor was African-American.

Dulaney: Who was that?

Fullinwider: I can't call her name now. I'm sorry. I still have letters from her at home. We exchanged letters back forty years ago now. But I can't call her name unfortunately. She was really helpful and good and helped me a lot. And then the staff at--seemed like the staff at the first school I taught at was pretty integrated and I always had African-American principles, so this was natural to me. So growing up in Dallas I had a really easy time of it. Both my parents were there. My father lived until I was--I think I was twenty-one when he died, so I had him for my childhood. He had a massive heart attack and died. I mean, it was plain Jane. Little league, played in the little league in the summer and go fishing. It was that kind of thing.

Dulaney: What did your parents do?

Fullinwider: My father was an insurance salesman. My mom would take either seasonal jobs or odd jobs. She was a stay-at-home mom, but from time to time she would take [unclear].

Dulaney: Both born in Dallas also?

Fullinwider: They were. They were both born in Dallas. They both went to SMU [Southern Methodist University]. And I think they were both downwardly mobile. I think their families were a little wealthier than they became.

Dulaney: Were they upset that you didn't go to SMU?

Fullinwider: No. By the time my brother and I were getting ready to go to college--this was 1968, 1969, and 1970--it was just war at our house. They were just happy we were trying to go to college. At that time everyone was eligible for the draft and so we had student deferments. I guess they thought that was okay. They know if we weren't in college that we would probably defy the draft and bring dishonor to the family. This was during the Vietnam period and neither of us were going we knew. And so they were pretty happy that we just went to college. I remember I was in the first lottery in 1971 for draft and I was nineteen, so I knew if I had a low number I was going. But they put everybody's birthday in a hat or in a wheel and I came out number 297. I knew they weren't going past maybe sixty even though that was a heavy draft period, heavy Vietnam build-up period.

So we called it the "Wheel of death lottery" and we won, you know. [Dulaney laughs] That's how we felt about it. So I'd say probably I had a typical upbringing for the period. But I think people do remember that time, the late 1960s [and] early 1970s, inaccurately often. In Dallas I can remember--it's not like all the kids were hippies and they were all peace-nicks. That wasn't what it was like. It really wasn't. It was just a smaller portion of people.

Dulaney: What did your parents think about your activism and your politics?

Fullinwider: I guess my father had passed before I really was very active. I think my mom kind of liked it. I was pretty visible as an activist, so her friends were always saying, "Hey, I saw John on TV."

Dulaney: "Saw John in the paper."

Fullinwider: In the newspaper or on TV. And they'd always say, "What's he doing?" But they were so happy to see me on TV. They knew I was on there for something, not like I'd been a--committed a crime or something. So they figured that was good and they'd ask her about

it. And I think it had the effect of--it didn't affect her politics, but it did affect her personal understanding of things that I was working on. And she was pretty supportive down through the years.

Dulaney: The Bois d'Arc Patriots.

Fullinwider: We called it Bo dark. But that's what it's from. It's from the wood. The Bois d'Arc tree.

Dulaney: How successful were they?

Fullinwider: Well, I'd say pretty successful and I'll give you some concrete examples. We worked on real bread and butter issues. That's what we worked on. Repairs for homeowners in low income areas, tenant rights, and then later we worked on broader issues like early childhood education. For instance, we would--our neighborhood was being--this was a neighborhood over there by East Grand [Avenue] and now it's like a working class, Latino neighborhood. But back in the 1970s a lot of retired, a lot of older whites lived there. Some integration, but the idea of younger families living in the inner-city had not taken off at that point. So it was people who had lived there a long time and that rent houses. The area was being--

-we didn't want the same thing to happen that had happened in Bryan Place which I mentioned earlier. Bryan Place was where a developer was given a lot of incentives in order to clear the land and build new housing. This was one of the first townhouse developments at that time. And the people who were living there in the old frame houses were given no incentive to stay. Like a home loan to fix up. So we thought, okay, [in] this neighborhood the same thing could happen. Poor working class neighborhood. It's got a lot of tenants renting houses and it has a lot of elderly people who can't fix their houses up. We looked at the dynamic there and we thought in order to avoid that we've got to change the zoning and we've got to get some home repair money in here. The reason I say we were successful is that neighborhood's standing today. A low density neighborhood with houses that were mainly built in the 1930s and some even sooner. And it's still an affordable area where mainly working class and lower income people live. And the demography's changed a little bit. Like I said it's more Latino now. But the way we did it was we created a planned development district that was the first sort of what

you might call a low income planned development district. In other words what we did--zoning is mainly prescriptive. In other words if you have an older neighborhood or vacant lot and you put townhouses zoning on it then you can develop up to townhouse zoning. Or if you make it offices you can make it offices or anything lower than that on the zoning code. So what we did is we said, "No. Let's make it descriptive." So we put an overlay that said, everything that exists as of the date of this ordinance is a legal conforming use under the zoning code. If you're a shade-tree mechanic its conforming use. If you sell a few--I mean there were a lot of little interesting businesses over there. If you had a daycare house it was a conforming use. Which meant that you weren't in violation of any codes. Or if your house sat weird on the lot, like it was developed before they had zoning, it was a conforming use. And then if for any reason the building got torn down or burned it had to come back as a single family. So there are no tenant houses over there and all it changed in increase in price was incremental and so it stabilized that neighborhood. So that was a really big success. To

drive through there almost forty years later and see roughly the same neighborhood but with better housing conditions that's what we were looking for. Another thing that we did was we had a program to council people on their rights as tenants. So we spun that off as an organization that became the East Dallas Tenants Alliance. And then in the late 1970s became the Texas Tenants Union which is in five cities now around the state and my wife runs the Texas Tenants Union. So it's been in existence almost forty years now and provides information for tenants, stops evictions, helps people get their deposit back. We would start with really concrete things and then go broader. So the Tenants Union also works on the preservation of federally assisted housing in a policy sense as well. That was kind of our motto. We'd start with immediate needs, look at the larger issue, and then try to come up with a policy prescription. So on the issue of home loans for the people to fix up their houses one of the first neighborhood housing service programs which was headed up by Billy Richards who was a very prominent African-American woman banker here later

in her career. But she was the head of that program at the time [and] set up their office.

Dulaney: She worked for the city of Dallas?

Fullinwider: NHS [Neighborhood Housing Services] was a contractor with the city of Dallas and received community development block grant funds.

Dulaney: They had a Neighborhood Housing Service in the cities--in city hall as a matter of fact.

Fullinwider: Yes, but I think it was a separate non-profit group. But anyway, she was the head of it and we got--the first round of home loans were in that neighborhood, so that was good. That model we used throughout. In the late--I guess it might have been 1980 or 1981 we decided to get every group that we could find that was active and there were a lot of good active neighborhood groups at the time that had formed during the 1960s and 1970s. The older groups from the 1960s like the South Dallas Improvement League, the South Central League. And, they were all a model on the Montgomery League. So these were people who at that time were like in their late sixties then, like Marjorie Jackson who lived to be 104. She was

the president of the South Dallas Improvement League which was over what you call Queen City [Heights]. So we got those kind of groups together. We had a conference. We called it the Conference on Community Resources. And out of that came the first community development corporation in Dallas which was Common Ground Community Economic Development Corporation. And the building we're in now the Innercity Development Corporation was a spin-off from Common Ground, had many of the same people involved in it. That was just an example of trying to take things that we learned in an immediate needs sense and turn them into a policy or program alternative. And then we did that with the Tenants Union and we did that also--I was a school teacher, of course, and another key person in the Patriots group-Terry Ford was an early childhood educator. This would be in the summer of 1978. We decided to start our own school. We were going to call it the East Dallas Free School, but we thought that might be a little harder to raise money for, so it became the East Dallas Community School. That's the era it was in. We started it that fall. We had nine students. We were in a church. For a while we were in Hopewell

Missionary Baptist Church on Dolphin Road. That was one of the few churches that said, "Yeah, if you fix up our building a little bit, we can put this school in there." We had a school bus that we borrowed from Saint Edward Cathedral. We began that program which today is--we have three campuses today. We serve about 500 kids in an award winning Montessori program. And it's all for your poor and working-class kids. If you volunteer there you can still get full daycare and Montessori education for \$25 a week. But we're in the process, after thirty years of fundraising to try to keep these going as independent grassroots schools, we converted them into charter schools. And so now they're completely free.

Dulaney: How did you get into some of these other issues like lead smelting? The West Dallas Housing Project and so on. Homelessness.

Fullinwider: This happened to me throughout my time here in Dallas. It happened through meeting certain people. Like, Charlie introduced me to J.B. Jackson and Elsie Faye Heggins. They always represent the civil rights movement, to me, in Dallas, those two. And then

through them I met the other younger activists like Dianne Ragsdale and others. [Points to wall] I'm pointing because we're in her office here. Sorry. [Laughter] Diane and I were going around trying to get people involved in an anti-displacement campaign city wide. Just to be real brief, in east Dallas you had your gentrification. In west Dallas you had just disinvestment, abandonment, plus the polluting industry. And then in south Dallas you had a lot of public works displacement, like the Fair Park displacement in the 1960s that Peter Johnson and them we're all involved in. And then you had the Interstate 45 [highway] and the way Interstate 30 was carved right through east Dallas [and] south Dallas there. So there was a lot of public works displacement there and code enforcement displacement. Like tear down your house. And so we were trying to think of a city wide campaign against this. We went out to west Dallas one night and they said, "Yeah we'll help you on that. We're being poisoned by this lead smelt" and "How about helping us on that?" One of the things I did in high school was organize the first Earth Day thing in 1970 there when I was in high school. I thought, 'Oh, okay.

Let's work on this.' Now you might be wondering how I made a living when I was doing this.

Dulaney: I was going to ask you if you were still teaching.

Fullinwider: No. I had quit teaching and I was making a living--I did two years as a VISTA Volunteer. Bois d'Arc Patriots had a Vista project. That's like AmeriCorps only [VISTA] came first. And then after that I--

Dulaney: Back up. You need to explain both. I know what they are. Volunteers in service to America.

Fullinwider: Okay. Alright. So I worked as a Volunteer in Service to America. This was like--they called it the domestic Peace Corps. And it was a program that grew out of JFK's [John F. Kennedy] Peace Corps program for people wanting to work on, basically, any poverty issues in America. The Bois d'Arc Patriots, which was really just an informal band activists, we had a non-profit group that we sponsored things through. It was called Community People for Self Determination. We became a VISTA site and a couple of us locally took slots and then we had some national people like college students from around the country would come in and volunteer with us. So

I did that for two years. You received a small stipend and there were a couple of little perks like if you broke your glasses they would [laughs] fix them. But it wasn't--you couldn't live on it. You had to--anyway. So that's how I made a living for two years there. And after that it was just odd jobs. I just did odd jobs. I wasn't able to go back to teaching because it's too full-time. I wanted to organize and do activism full-time. After we formed Common Ground Community [Economic] Development Corporation I had a small salary there for some years. For the next ten years or so. Okay. So we decided to find out what we could about lead pollution in west Dallas. The person who asked me about it were two, Patricia Spears whose father was Reverend W.E. Spears of Progressive [Missionary] Baptist Church there on Westmoreland [Road]. They also had Spears [Family] Funeral Home. And then the other was Reverend D.L. Burrell. He lived over on Bickers Street and he was probably in his late sixties at that time. And he knew everything about west Dallas. I met him and this meeting and he said, "You ought to come by. You ought to come by the house." So I'd just go over to his house and he'd

tell me all about it. Then I'd do what I always did which was try to document all the personal testimony that I had. At that time there had been one study of lead pollution in the area. It was done at UT Southwestern and it was called the Johansen Luby Study. James Luby still practices over there at UT Southwestern. But he studied this in 1973. Found higher elevated levels of lead there. Councilwoman Heggins really pushed this. This would have been 1980 or 1981 after she was elected in May of 1980. So after that. To get some blood testing in the area. The first round of tests wasn't very well publicized and they said, "Nobody cares about this", you know, blah blah. So then we began to organize around it. The second round of blood testing had hundreds of families involved and the kids had high level lead. Then EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] got interested at that time and Jim Maddox was Attorney General. He'd been a democratic congressman in Dallas and he got interested in it. So we began to organize on two levels. Pat was organizing a major personal injury lawsuit with the firm of Baron and--Fred Baron's law firm. He made a big splash environmentally with an Asbestos case,

[a] class action. So they were working on that and we would organize something called the Neighborhood Committee on Lead Pollution which was just going to be our vehicle to protest and organize and try to get the thing closed down. We thought it would take--this was a very successful campaign by the way. J.B. said, "This is going to take ten years." And it almost did. We in the summer of 1983 put forward a plan to use the zoning code to shut down a lead smelter. Because the city attorney kept saying, "We don't have any legal handle. We can't shut down this lead smelter." We said, "Well what about the air pollution violations?" [They said], "Well there not polluting right now." I said, "I know, but a year ago they were. Can't you--it's a crime." No, no and no. So we had raised enough [unclear] to where the city had appointed a blue ribbon committee to study it and we just appointed ourselves to study it too because we knew they weren't going to come up with what we were going to come up with. I remember thinking, 'When we opened the East Dallas Community School we had to have a special youth permit.' And surely you need an industrial youth permit for an industrial lead smelter. So I just got a zoning map

and I saw that it was in I-3 zoning. I went to the zoning code. In I-3 zoning you could have a metal smelting and plating company if you had a specific use permit. I went back and all specific use permits were overlaid on the map and I didn't see one. So I thought, 'Okay, I'm not going to ask them about this because if I do they'll just come up with one and say it wasn't put on the map.' So I just went and looked and went through all their records that I could get at the time. City hall was actually more open then than it was now because there weren't that many activists and you'd just go down there and say, "I want to see all the specific use permits in west Dallas" and you'd just sit there and do it. And you had to because there wasn't the internet to have it on. So I determined to the best that I could that they didn't have the specific youth permit. So we made our report which was the Neighborhood Committee on Lead Pollution report and our major strategy was to use the zoning code to shut this smelter down. That became the way not only that smelter was shut down, but the smelter in Oak Cliff called Dixie Metals. The west Dallas one actually was shut down by mid-decade, but we didn't get Dixie Metals shut

down until New Year's Eve 1989. So it did, J.B. was right, it did take ten years to close those lead smelters. And then there's still the cleanup problems which finally have been pretty much resolved. But that was like--it illustrated a lot. It illustrated how you had to know more than your enemy. That was one thing. You had to do research. You had to have a community uprising or you wouldn't get their attention even if you were right. And then you had to stay with it. You just had to stay with it. I thought after we closed the lead smelter that we could get some investment in the public housing out there, but meanwhile on a parallel track there was a constitutional issue about racial steering within the housing authority that was brought in around 1985. The ultimate settlement of that case involved tearing down many units in west Dallas. And we were against this. We wanted the units fixed up. We wanted the units plus vouchers and they were saying, "No, we can only have a tradeoff." So that was an unfortunate split. But it showed the complications in housing. When you're applying a policy or a law as policy sometimes it conflicts with conditions on the ground. I remember I kept

saying, "Look, you know, when they integrated the restaurants they didn't shut down all the restaurants down here. Why can't we have both?" But anyway, be that as it may, that's how I got involved in the west Dallas public housing thing. That was a long interesting battle because it was actually the same battle except it split over the resources. Like, there's no resources for remedy if we don't tear down the housing and replace it with vouchers. And we said, "Don't do that." But anyway, it came back around and actually did build some more housing out there and it's just as segregated as it always was basically. So that wasn't totally the issue there. But that's how I got involved in that. That was a pretty long battle and it went through a couple of administrations because I remember we--

Dulaney: I was going to say, you were on a special committee on the homeless for Starke Taylor and then you were advocating for them not tearing these down, but redoing them, rebuilding more--

Fullinwider: Refurbishing them.

Dulaney: Refurnishing them. Because they wanted to tear down 2,600 units.

Fullinwider: That's true and they did tear down probably that many and then they rebuild some back. I don't know how many units are out there today. It's less dense than it was. But actually the area wasn't that dense. It wasn't like a--it was a huge area and so you really only had seven or eight units per acre out there. But the design was bad. I'm not saying it was good. You had the unfortunate position of trying to defend an empty housing unit that you wanted to see fixed up and it's kind of a hard case to make. One of the things we used to dramatize the need for was--this was probably in 1991. A group of homeless people took over a block there in--what street was that? I can't remember--Morris probably. And we took over a block and we set up a solar water heater. We began to put the thing together. And just to illustrate that for not too much money you could fix the units back up. They were on pier and beam foundations and were brick, so we thought, you know--. And that was a really interesting campaign because the homeless people had many problems like addiction and mental health problems and then also just health problems like being injured and stuff. And so you talk about a rag-tag army, it was a rag-tag army. But we did

have a successful occupation there for about six months and then we tried to find everybody other housing because we knew they were going to shut it down at some point. Plus we were just trying to illustrate an approach. We couldn't fix all the public housing out there with nothing. So that's how I got to work on that. But on the homeless issue in particular--Diane Ragsdale had been elected to the city council in the seat after 1984 I think. Because you had your opportunity for the first African-American county commissioner in 1984 in Dallas. Jim Tyson the old democrat had retired and his district was now majority minority. We had three candidates, Commissioner Price who won that election, Fred Blair who just recently died who'd been the chief chair of the Black Caucus in the Texas legislature, and Councilwoman Heggins. All ran in the democratic primary in 1984. Blair and Heggins had to vacate their council seats to run and so Diane was the second successor. And I think she appointed me to a bunch of committees at that time, I think. I think that's how I got on that committee. But anyway, that committee recommended the first public shelter in Dallas. But we couldn't get any money for it at the

time. And I remember we wanted it part of a bond election which actually had included improvements at the zoo. I tried to make that point. We could fix up the cages at the zoo and we can't have a homeless shelter. And it wasn't until quite a few years later that Annette Strauss who'd been on that on that committee got some private charity and started the Downtown Dallas Family Shelter which is now Family Gateway. And then the bridge thing just happened like a couple of years ago. It could have happened as early as in the early 1980s if we had prevailed on that committee. And I stayed involved with that. I ended up on the board for the National Coalition for the Homeless and some other national groups that worked on housing and tried to stay on that issue. Our issue was basically that housing was the prime first solution for a homeless person. I mean, you can't really deal with your addictions when you're living outdoors and you can't stabilize your psychosis when you're living outdoor completely vulnerable. So we wanted to push housing as an answer. And you see that more now. It's less emphasis on shelter and more what they call

supportive housing-housing plus services. All of that was big losses and little victories.

Dulaney: What do you mean by big losses? Because they tore down all those units?

Fullinwider: That and it was fairly hard--you didn't really get housing for all the homeless people or anything like that. It just seemed like the forces that were--you know we were successful in that one neighborhood over there in east Dallas and stabilizing, but most of east Dallas that they wanted, they being the gentrifiers, developers, and policy makers behind them, actually succeeded in displacing people. And so we lost a lot there, but things are better than they were. I mean, there are some legal remedies if you are a tenant now, for instance, for poor housing conditions. Back in the late 1970s we didn't even have what's called a warrant of habitability law. In other words you could rent a house and you didn't have to warrant or guarantee that it was even livable. There was a member of the East Dallas Tenants Alliance whose daughter fell off a balcony and was killed. So that was the origin of the state law. We took that case and said, "You have got to

guarantee some livability in rental housing. And then you've got to have remedy if you're renting." Most of these things had a way of winding their way to some policy change.

Dulaney: Speaking of policy, how did the policy makers react to some of the issues you were pursuing?

Fullinwider: Well originally--I started working on local policy stuff in like 1977, 1978. So the city council at that time--the mayor was Robert Folsom. He was a big developer, a big right-winger. He had been the president of the school board during some of the desegregation litigation. He was so recalcitrant, so intransigent that the Fifth circuit Court of Appeals began to send their orders to his house to make sure he couldn't claim he never saw them. Now the Fifth circuit's no longer where it was, but it was an integration, progressive court at that time. And they couldn't believe the defiance of this board president of the school board. But the school board was always sort of an entry level job for politicians in Dallas and they usually moved on to the city council afterwards, like a mayor we dealt with in the 1990s, Steve Bartlett. He started out on the

school board and urban rehab standards board. The school board's not the jumping off place that it used to be, but it was at the time. It was where they'd groom them to--. The planning commission, the code enforcement board which was the urban rehab standards board, and the school board were where they groomed the new leadership to go on the city council or run for state legislature or whatever. So they hated this. I mean, it was war. We weren't all partners for progress back then. So we met a lot of resistance and we did a lot of direct-action protests. We had to. But I won't say it wasn't fun either. It was fun. Protest is fun.

Dulaney: What level resistance did you get? We had Peter Johnson in here of SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] of course they threatened his life. He had to sleep in different places.

Fullinwider: No, no. We did not--I have never run into that to be honest. But I'm just talking about--just because you were right they wouldn't change the law. You had to bring enough people, disrupt the meeting, go to jail or whatever.

Dulaney: How many times did you go to jail?

Fullinwider: Zero! [Dulaney laughs] And I'll tell you the most interesting one was [when] I was protesting the sleeping in public ordinance. And this was at the end of a fairly high level campaign for homeless people that I was prominent in. When they reinstated the sleeping in public law it was around Christmas holidays right after Ron Kirk had become the mayor. So I went down and I said, "I'm going to sleep out here till I get arrested and we're going to test this case." And so the first night I slept through. Nobody bothered me. The second night they woke me up and I said, "Hey man, I'm not out here for fun. Go ahead and arrest me." [Dulaney laughs] And they said, "Well you're not asleep." I said, "Well give me five minutes." They said, "No, no. They told us upstairs"--they'd point to city hall. They say, "That guy never sleeps, so don't arrest him." And so I couldn't. I tried for three nights and then I said, "Well I'll give it up." So I really lucked out. I really lucked out. The times that I got thrown out of city hall usually they just take you outside and they--. Because really--the actual person that carries you out, he's not a policy maker. He's just a regular person. They kind of like it. Most people

hate their boss for instance. Their boss was the city council. I don't think they minded it that much. So anyway. I do have an FBI file. [Gives thumbs up] So I was at least that dangerous. [Dulaney laughs] But not dangerous or in a dangerous situation like Peter and them faced in the Deep South--deeper south.

Dulaney: Well Peter faced it here too.

Fullinwider: Yes and many--I mean, it's no secret that the black activists had it harder than Charlie Young and I did. Definitely. But, like I said, we make some progress on all fronts. So that was enough encouragement to keep trying.

Dulaney: Why did you go back to teaching?

Fullinwider: I was broke. I had two kids and they had started to eat solid food. [Laughter] So I went back to teaching in 1994. I tried to stay as active as I could still even though I was a teacher. But I did start working on some education issues and stuff with the teacher's union. I taught in an alternative school so it was easy for me to--I didn't really have to read up on it to see what was wrong with the school

system. I could just ask my students how they ended up in alternative school and I could find out. But I did keep up with the field and tried to press for the, you know, smaller classes and so forth as much as I could.

Dulaney: I was going to ask, how did your wife react to your activism.

You mentioned that she's actually been involved herself.

Fullinwider: Yes. She came here as a VISTA volunteer and that's how we met. So there was never any conflict there with us. But there was a point, like I was saying, after the kids were like three and one. I remember her saying, "Hey you know, you'd better get a real job or we're going to need our own help here in a minute." So I took my wedding suit which I could still wear and I went over to DISD and got a job as a Latin teacher. That old classical education came in handy. So that was that.

Dulaney: The Common Ground--what was it--the Common Ground Community Development--

Fullinwider: Common Ground Community Economic Development Corporation.

Dulaney: Okay. Is that the same thing as the Common Ground Credit Union?

Fullinwider: Well, the credit union was sponsored by the Development Corporation and founded by pretty much the same people. Now those were two attempts to create alternative programs. And Common Ground--the Development Corporation still exists although we're not in an expansion mode at all. We just have a network of houses that mainly have frail elderly people living in them. I'm just a caretaker on that program. As the people pass I usually sell the house and we try to keep that alive in that way. The credit union lasted from 1988 until about probably--I don't know, about--maybe ten years, close to ten years. Maybe not. Maybe seven or eight years. But it lasted longer than many banks during that era and at one point it was the only bank in west Dallas. And actually at one point it was the only bank in south Dallas. So we had two branches there for a while. It was a federal credit union. It was the first community development federal credit union in Dallas which--a community development federal credit union was a community based, geography based credit union

that served primarily low income people rather than like a credit union at your job-employment based. We started it with a thousand dollars and ten members and by the time it closed years later it was pretty big. It was a pretty big credit union. It had hundreds of members and--too many outstanding loans and of course that's why it ended up merging with Telco [Plus Credit Union]. If you really want to lose your free time start yourself a federally regulated financial institution. I will say that was the death of my free time because no matter how late I stayed up I couldn't keep up with it at that point. The African-American Pastors Coalition took over the sponsorship of the credit union and ran it about five more years and then merged it. So it lasted a while and plus we were trying to illustrate--all our programs are to illustrate an approach and to try to get larger societal institutions to come in. So the program for Common Ground-the Development Corporation we started basically just trying to save houses that were being condemned. And we thought we'd do a few and change the policy, but we ended up owning them and we ended up owning and selling them. We ended up with about a hundred houses which

is a pretty big management problem and we sold them off as we went. Then we started an employment service and then we started the credit union, so we had different things. We tried what was called a community loan fund before we did the credit union, where we would loan money for home repairs and stuff. It ended up being a community grant fund. [Laughs] I wasn't very good at loan collection I'll have to say. The first time I re-poed [repossessed] a car for the credit union I thought, 'Oh god, this is the death of an activist.' [Dulaney laughs] 'I'm taking a car.' Plus it was almost a death because the guy came running out with his pistol, of course. [Laughter] We're taking his car. So all of these things were--like I say, the whole idea was to take immediate needs of the people, try to make a program or a policy initiative that would address those needs on a larger scale and then bring in resources--usually public resources to bear on the problem. The programs we started were really just to illustrate what we meant, how to do it. We never really built it out like some of the groups did that were--that used a lot of community development money and built

themselves up. The more power to them, but that's not how we ran Common Ground.

Dulaney: What motivated you to do all of these things?

Fullinwider: I did this from love, man. I did it from love. I'm a peace and love man. I guess since I grew up not in the middle class I never had any big care for money. I can assume a floor of modicum of prosperity so I didn't have to struggle for money, so it didn't concern me that much. When I left school with a teaching certificate I thought, 'Oh, this will be enough money.' No big deal. Of course I didn't realize at the time all the advantages I had from being a middle class white boy in Dallas. But when I became more aware of them it actually motivated me to try to overcome that. Also the people that I met were very inspiring and I had help. Like I mentioned, the teacher who mentored me was African-American. After I met J.B. and Elsie Faye Higgins, most everybody I was working with were African-American people who were a little older than me. And they were like so nurturing. They were happy to see me. There wasn't that many people like me, I guess. It was a very inspiring thing and they had caught

hell probably every day of their lives, but they were still willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. And I was always doing practical things so it did illustrate some usefulness. That was my idea. I wasn't like a super happy person. I was a melancholy type person, but I decided to try to make myself useful. That's what it was. And so I was kind of nurtured by the times as well.

Dulaney: Okay. Were you consistent? Reading this article from 1987 when they interviewed you and they asked, "Why doesn't he use his white skin, his phi beta kappa"--You remember that one?--"His phi beta kappa key, his University of Texas degree to make some money?" And of course your response is, "Love! [Fullinwider laughter] Love of Justice".

Fullinwider: Love of Justice. Well it's true. It's a good way to live your life. So that's why I stuck with it down through the years. Very rewarding way of life.

Dulaney: Let me ask you. We're both educators here. You wrote in an op-ed piece that says, "What Dallas needs in the next superintendent". What does Dallas need in the next superintendent now? This one you wrote in 2000. What does Dallas need now?

Fullinwider: I guess we need somebody who is braver than the last ones we've had. To advocate for children in the public schools right now you have got to be a social change radical, basically. Because look, the school system is being asked to repair problems in the society that it's not prepared to alleviate. If you're an educator and you want to change the world you have to realize this fact--that the institution you're trying to use to change the world is just as riddled with racism and inequality as the world. In fact if you argued from results its purpose is to replicate the status quo. I mean, there's always a good school or a star student who defies all expectations, but in the aggregate--this function falls to the private schools now, but the wealthy schools educate the owners of America and the working-class schools educate the working people and the poor schools educate the prison population and the outcasts of this country and it's been that. That's what it does. And so you have to have someone who, to me, would admit that the society has to change more so the schools can change more. I think that all of the--this idea of getting a super bureaucrat who can focus on your test scores is

about the worst way to raise test scores that there is, in my opinion. You need someone who would say something like, "Let's keep the schools open twenty-four/seven and turn them into community centers. Let's keep them open all summer. Let's have everybody that's not an adult, like if you're in elementary, middle school, or say ninth and tenth grade--you don't leave school just to go hang out. You're parents either pick you up or you stay here till later and we do interesting things for you and with you." But the school as a community center. Somebody that had a vision a little broader than just test scores would be what we need.

Dulaney: My last question until Dr. Roberts finishes his. Would you do all of this again if you had to do it again?

Fullinwider: Oh in a minute. In a minute. Life in the movement is very engaging. I can't imagine living any other way. If you are--if you have a choice to avoid hardship, like carve out a bubble for yourself in America, you can do that if you're from a certain class and have a certain amount of money. Or you can do it by deadening all your emotions with drugs or something like that. You can get out of the way of this thing

if you want to, but it's not a--I never saw that as a choice. I couldn't see it and I guess I think it was the times that I grew up in as much as anything. But the idea of just going through the world and collecting more possessions and saying bye at the end I just couldn't do that, you know. That doorway was open to me, but I did not open it. I went the other way.

Dulaney:       What would you change?

Fullinwider:   What would I change? Well--I probably made a zillion mistakes, so I don't know. I'd probably do--sometimes when you're trying to change something you work as an organizer. You get people--and at the time I was doing it meant go door to door and get people to come with you. And sometimes you're just hanging out there in the wind as an activist, so on your own. I probably did the second much too much. I would have done more of the first thing. I probably would have had better--more impact. But sometimes it just seemed like there wasn't time or I couldn't get anybody interested in what I wanted to do, so you just had to speak to the public through the

media and then hope you could get some allies that way.

Dulaney: Dr. Roberts.

Dr. Roberts: What is your role in the East Dallas Community School?

Fullinwider: I'm a co-founder and president of the board.

Roberts: Now when I called you said you worked for a hospital.

Fullinwider: Yes. My profession now [is] I'm a medical librarian and I work at UT Southwestern and I work at Baylor Health Sciences Library.

Roberts: I thought I heard that. In terms of the future of the continuity of leadership especially at the grassroots level do you see a layer of young people coming on? What's your assessment?

Fullinwider: I think that we need to do a lot more with that. About maybe five years ago I remember Diane Ragsdale and myself and a couple of others--you know about this Dr. Roberts, the School for Community Organizing. We were going to try to nurture some, grow some more activists. And they've had some really limited success with that. But I think that there--I think much more needs to be done on that. Actually, I

don't see it. I don't see a lot of--except for the Tenants Union, I don't see a lot of grassroots activism right now. And I'm not as plugged into it as I once was, but I don't see that much happening. And I'm surprised because of the recession. Conditions are pretty bad. I'm surprised there's not more. Although, there is a--I thought Obama's campaign in 2008 really energized. I was teaching at the time and it really energized my students and I think gave them a politics that they didn't have. Like, I would teach the civil rights movement when I was teaching English. I'd just make up lessons about the civil rights movement. We'd read "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". You know, something like that in class. And this was not known to them--to the students that I taught, that I was teaching in the 1990s. They weren't aware of this. They knew the "I Have a Dream" speech, but this was just a dream as far as they were--it was like George Washington and the cherry tree. We weren't teaching it as a district or as a society. We weren't teaching it as action for justice. We were just teaching it as, "This was a bad problem a long time ago." And so when you have a student in high school say, "Was

this like back with Martin Luther King and slavery time?"--you know, they just like compressed it all. But they responded to it really well. Or I would teach the Chicano movement when I--my classes were all Latino and black kids. We had one or two white kids in the school, that's all. But they would really respond well to this and I would say, "Look you know, this is a heritage and if you claim it it'll make your life richer and more purposeful. But you've got to claim it. Its there's for you to claim." They would be really interested in it. I think we could do a lot more with it. I really do and I wish that we would. But I don't see it. I don't see a lot of young activists pushing the justice issues.

Roberts: It's something we need to do more. See you are certainly sensitive and did it on your own, but as some response the educational institution need to make to so that young people are exposed to curriculum--

Fullinwider: Yes and I think that teachers who do it even without it being in the official curriculum--I mean you can learn to write essays by reading the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". You don't have to read some TAKS

[Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] essay to learn to write an essay. But I think the other thing we could do is to--let's start a Saturday school. Two hours with some pizza and just talk to young people and get them involved. The issue you'll see them come out on is police misconduct. You'll get your--young men will be out on that because they catch hell every day. Even though it's not a high profile issue like it was thirty years ago, forty years ago. But I think we could do quite a bit with that. I think the schools could do more but I think just as a church sponsored or activist sponsored thing we could probable grow some more activists if spent more time with it. The last protest I did was--became known as the Bikini Protest. It was last summer and we were trying to--summer of 2010 and we were trying to keep the pools open in Dallas. The pools were closing at the end of July which they used to be--when I was a kid they were open till Labor Day. So it was a hundred degrees every day and most of the pools--we had like twenty-one pools and only seven of them were open. So we got--I pitched it to some kids at the South Dallas Cultural Center and a couple others that I knew from teaching. [I

said], "Let's do some street theater and y'all come in your bathing suits and we'll pretend we're going to swim at the city hall fountain if they don't open these pools up." Of course it's illegal to get in the fountain so it gave us the cache to get the press out. And kids in bikinis, teenagers in bikinis. The press loved that. They responded really well. They loved that. So we could do engaging things that involve them and then follow up on it. But we need to--we probably have some infrastructure in place that we could activate for this purpose, but I think that we should be recruiting, trying to grow more activists. Get them in community colleges and in high schools and so forth. I think we need to do a lot with that.

Dulaney: Last question. You won those teaching awards in 1996 and 1997. I'm jealous [Fullinwider laughs] as a teacher. What's your secret?

Fullinwider: Teaching is all about relationships. When you can get a relationship with your student--I always saw myself as the broker between the student and the material. I wasn't going to just teach the material, but I was going to teach the student the material.

And so I would try to work on that level. You can't be everybody's pal as a teacher, but once they know you're in solidarity with them then you build relationships with them. Then they'll let you teach them. The other thing is that when you're teaching in a public school you're dealing with a class usually and so you have to manage that class. But you can't demand obedience from a group of teenagers. They'll do it. You'll get something, but you won't get obedience. What you've got to do is spend most of your time creating really engaging lessons and then most of the kids will want to do it and then they'll sort of begin a self-management process. Now I won't say I never had a problem with a class because all teachers do. But most of the time when I would do those things, when I would focus on the relationship that I'm trying to build here so that I can deliver this product and when I put more time into prep to make a lesson relevant and engaging and so forth, then I could do my job. But if I spent all my time on classroom management techniques then I still had a cruddy lesson and no one would get it anyway. They wouldn't get it. And then the other thing that helped me a lot and which

is not available to all teachers--when I would do something as an activist it always helped me as a teacher because they'd say, "Oh, I see what you're doing. You're like a hell raiser." And I'd say, "Yeah, but I'm not just fighting my best friend and injuring my family I'm trying to fight the people who are keeping me down for real. And that's what I'm trying to encourage y'all to do." The success I had as a teacher was from those principles.

Dulaney: Alright. Anything you want to add?

Fullinwider: Well one is that I got a lot of inspiration from the national civil rights movement. Because I was born in 1952 I'm a kid in the late 1950s and I'm seeing all this on TV. TV generation. That was really inspiring to me. And then for my friends and I in high school there was an affirming atmosphere. If you had a generous impulse and you understood you were for peace instead of war there was something to affirm that for you. I think that's the kind of atmosphere we need to create for young people now. There needs to be somewhere to go when they say, "Hey, I don't like this. I'm not being treated right." Instead of just getting mad and beating up

their girlfriend or fighting each other they need some place to take that natural rebellion. Because if you look around the world at the actual armed rebellions it's usually late teens, early twenties. And you have the same kind of rebellion here except it's just anarchic because there's no politics to it. We need to grow them up in some kind of atmosphere that nurtures this social change thing, so that when they begin to see--because kids really aren't stupid. If they're in a under resourced school and they go play football against a suburban school and see the difference, they get that. So when they start feeling ripped off what do we have to tell them besides study hard and you'll do well later? We need to tell them, "Yeah, this is a system and we want you to survive the system, but we [also] want to help you change the system for you and for us." And so that's what we need to do. I really think that legacy is there. We just need to claim it and lift it back up.

Dulaney: That's great. That's great. Alright. Thank you John.

Fullinwider: No, thank you. Thank you all for this.

[End of Interview]