

Oral History Collection

Zan W. Holmes, Jr.

Interviewer: Robert L. Price and Malik H. Dulaney

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Place of Interview: Dallas, TX

Mr. Price: My name is Robert L. Price. The African American Education Archives and History Program and the African American Museum are documenting the Civil Rights Movement in Dallas County, Texas. Today, August 26, 2011, I am interviewing Reverend Dr. Zan Wesley Holmes, Jr. in the African American Museum located in Fair Park, Dallas, Texas. Reverend Holmes, we appreciate your participation in this project. We're grateful that you are willing to make this contribution.

Rev. Holmes: Thank you.

Mr. Price: First of all, I will ask you some questions dealing with your early childhood and your

education. Where were you born and how long have you lived in Dallas?

Holmes: I was born in San Angelo, Texas. My father was a United Methodist preacher, but he moved to Waco, Texas where I spent--I was nine months old and I spent years there, until I was thirteen and then to Austin, Texas, where I graduated from high school and college. Upon graduating from college in 1956, I came to Dallas to enroll in Perkins School of Geology at Southern Methodist University. I've been here ever since. I think that's about fifty-five years that I've been here in Dallas.

Price: You mentioned you going to SMU [Southern Methodist University]. Let me ask you a question--what is your total educational background?

Holmes: I graduated from Huston-Tillotson University in 1956. I graduated from Perkins School of Geology in 1959. I, then, continued at SMU at the Perkins School for an additional degree, which was then the Masters of Systematic Sacred Geology. It is now the Doctor of Ministry Degree. The terminology has changed. That's the extent of my formal education.

Price: When you were a youngster, if you attended school in a segregated system, describe the facility, the textbooks, the equipment, and anything that was not appropriate.

Holmes: In Waco, Texas was where I attended elementary school up to junior high school. It was a fairly--I lived a somewhat sheltered life. It was a school about two blocks from where we lived. My father was a pastor in the church there. I don't recall many disadvantages I had in that system at that time, because that was all I knew [laughs]. I lived close by and very good teachers. So, that went well for me. I later on became aware of some of the segregation in the segregated school and some of the differences in the facilities and other things about the school. But, I was not too much aware of anything beyond that at that particular time in elementary school. [Phone rings] I'm sorry.

Dulaney: That's alright. I'll take this opportunity--[moves camera].

Price: You mentioned that your father was a minister--who were your parents and what were their occupations? What did your mother do?

Holmes: Yes, my father was a minister. My mother was a house-wife. She never worked outside of the home. There was six children and she spent all of her time taking care of us. But, I will say that, years later after I reflect back on my life in Waco, I was unaware of that fact that there was a lynching back in Waco in the 1920s. I was shocked to know that I did not know about that while I was growing up in Waco. My parents did not mention it. My teachers did not mention it. It was all swept under the rug. Later on, I became aware of that and the tremendous impact that had upon that community of Waco. Community to races to segregation. This was a public lynching. Had a major psychological impact upon the Black folk and White folk. I grew up in that environment, in that kind of psychological environment and was shaped somewhat by that.

Price: I understand that you're retired now. What is, in your words--tell us something about your work

as a minister and your work prior to your retirement. What other jobs have you had, if any?

Holmes: When I was at SMU in the Perkins School of Geology, I was a student assistant pastor at Saint Paul United Methodist Church. It was pastored by the legendary Dr. I. B. Loud. A man appropriately named. [Laughter]. During all the time that I was at SMU, I was working there with him. After I was there for a couple of years, that church decided that it would sponsor new congregation in the Hamilton Park community. The Hamilton Park community was a community that was established to provide housing for black people. There was an overflow from the bombing that was going on the other side of Dallas, creating problems with a shortage of housing. The city farmers and others got together and decided they would build that community, [unclear]. Nice community, but there was no church in that community. St. Paul established a church. It was the Hamilton Park United Methodist Church and Dr. Loud was officially the pastor but he

assigned the work of that church to me. So, I went out and became a part of that congregation and I was officially the Associate Pastor in 1959. Then, a year later, I was named the full-time pastor of Hamilton Park United Methodist Church. I was there for ten years. I will say that I was influenced a lot in that community by the political participation. That's where I first became involved in politics. Jan Sanders, the wife of the late Judge Sanders, came out and helped us start a Voter Registration Campaign. We got--I got along with that. We had a tremendous record there. We registered that community and they had one of the highest voting records of any precinct in Dallas County because of the activities. I was a part of that. My political interest was influenced by that involvement in that community. In my last year there, my bishop appointed me as a district superintendent in the United Methodist Church, which meant I had supervisory responsibility for my thirty or forty churches [?]. All black at that time because of [unclear], we were

segregated. It was also during that year, the last year that I was there, that first year that I was appointed to that position--Joseph Lockridge, who was our first African-American legislature from Dallas County to be elected to the legislature since reconstruction, was killed in a plane crash that went down over Dawson, Texas. I was still a pastor at Hamilton Park at that time. I was a part of the group that helped to get him elected. We were very much involved in that. I also became part of a group of people who met after that to get someone to run [unclear] unexpired term in about six months. I remember we met in South Dallas and we were trying to get different people to run who, for various reasons, indicated that they were unable to run. Then, all of a sudden, everybody was looking at me. I was trying to get [unclear]. He can't run. Everybody was looking at me, and they said, "You can run." I said, "Well, I can't run." They said, "You can run [unclear]" I reluctantly agreed. Didn't consult my wife, my bishop, anybody. Reluctantly agreed because

the deal was to keep that seat, to keep an African American in that seat. We ran it large, all of us elected at large at that time. So, we had to appeal to everybody in Dallas County. It just so happened that I was made the District Superintendent at the churches all throughout the county. Anyway, I ran and I won, it was a race runoff. Let's see, seventeen other people in the race and I was the only black person in that race, but the black community got behind me. The Democratic Party got behind me because they needed Black representation. It was for their benefit to have Black representation, and I won that race. [Unclear] It was a special election.

Price: How many people were in that race?

Holmes: Seventeen. Seventeen people. Seventeen white persons. I was the only African-American, and I won. I had only planned to serve through his unexpired term. After that, I served and delegation tried to get me to continue to run for a full-time. I said, "Well, I don't want to do that." They said, "We got to keep this



seat. You won at large, so maybe you can continue to win at large." And I did, I went two full terms at large. My legislative goals were to get single-member districts because I ran at large, we were running at large. Curtis Graves and Barbara Jordan were in the legislature. Barbara was in the Senate, Curtis was in the House, but they went through single-member districts. We finally got single-member districts in Dallas, and I was on the redistricting committee and that was my legislative goal. As soon as we got single-member districts, I resigned.

Price: What about some of your experiences in the legislative?

Holmes: Oh, in the legislature? Wow, I tell you, it was an amazing thing. I remember, on the first day I was there, I saw Curtis Graves sitting down up front and I rushed over to greet him and he did this [puts both hands, palms out, in front of him], telling me not to come over. I did not understand what was going on. After the session was over, I talked with him. I said, "Curtis, why did you not want me coming over

to greet you?" and he said, "Oh, man. I don't ever let them catch us together in one spot. They get us both in one shot." [Laughter]. We worked together very well. That was in a sense that we had to represent all of Texas, all the black folk of Dallas, even though I was from Dallas and he was from Houston. Black people came to visit us whenever they had major concerns, they would come to us. You know, I was called some names on the floor. Some behind my back. The prejudice, the racism was still there. Even by one member of my delegation--he called me a name that I will not mention because I would not [unclear] for a tax payroll that I thought was unfair and also because I voted for single-member districts. That was the one thing that many of the white democrats did not want, although there were whites all over that were for that. Oscar Miles, for example in the Senate, they were all slowly for that. It was a challenging time for me, a very challenging time for me to spend that time away from home, but I survived.

Price: You know, recently, I read that while you were a student at SMU, it occurred outside of your apartment, and automobile accident. The police was someone who did not think an ambulance--at that time it was an African-American who was seriously injured. Tell us something about that.

Holmes: Yes. Actually, I was living in a one-room that my wife and I rented when we first came to Dallas over on Jordan Street. Passed by there a couple of weeks ago. I was in the room studying and I heard a loud crash on the freeway. I saw people rushing up to the freeway and I put down my books and I rushed up to the freeway also. When I got there, I noticed that there was a black man who had been hit by a car and was bleeding very profusely. I was disturbed and concerned that there, standing beside him, was a white policeman and a white ambulance driver and the ambulance was there, but they did nothing to transport that man to the hospital. I could not understand it, and I remember asking, "Why? Why aren't you all doing something?"

What's wrong here?" It was then that I was informed that--this was in 1956, and during that time, white ambulances did not transport black people. [Unclear] They were waiting for the ambulance from [unclear] to come and pick up that man. While they were waiting, that man died. Interestingly, I looked into their eyes of the white policeman and the white ambulance driver and I could sense that they were bothered by that. They wanted to do something, but they were, as I interpreted, they were bound by racism. I wanted to do something. I was bound by that same racism. I'm convinced that it was racism that killed that man and that really had an impact upon me even when I was--throughout my ministry, throughout my time in Dallas, I recall that event as symbolic for the way things were in Dallas in 1956. I made a vow then that if my ministry did not have anything to do with that, with eliminating that issue and problem that it would not be worth anything. I will say that some years later, I was invited to pre-speak at the graduation exercise for the Dallas

Police Academy. The mayor was black. The police chief was black. That class was one of the most inclusive and integrated classes in the history of the academy. There were Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians. There was a special group of officers from the Philippines who were trained in Dallas at that time. For me, it is somewhat symbolic of some of the progress that has been made since that experience I had with White policeman and the White ambulance driver in 1956. But, nevertheless, it also reminded me of how far we had to go here in Dallas in terms of the issue of racism which is still alive. We still talk about the divide in Dallas, the North-South divide. It's real, it's very real.

Price: There were several organizations that were involved in the Civil Rights Movement throughout the country, such as the NAACP, the Urban League, SNCC and CORE, and SELC. Did you belong to any of these organizations? If so, tell us something about your experiences.

Holmes: Yes, I became--when I was able financially, I became a member of the NAACP. I worked very closely

with the Southern League of Christians, when it was active here in Dallas, particularly in the early years. I also supported the Urban League. I did not participate with CORE, although I was well informed of some of the things that happened with CORE because Earl Allen was a United Methodist Pastor. Patrick Highland, he was United Methodist Church, had organized CORE here in Dallas. They were responsible for a sit-in at the Piccadilly--downtown Piccadilly cafeteria. They were arrested [unclear]. Left Dallas and went to Houston. I do recall the impact they had on the community because of their courage for picketing Piccadilly cafeteria because that was really [unclear] that kind of demonstration at that time. I remember Red James led a demonstration downtown and picketed some of the drug stores down there, but there was not much of that going on in Dallas and it took a lot courage for them to do that. CORE was doing that. I do also recall that SNCC was--Ernie McMillan [Earnest McMillan] and a man named Johnson. The man's

last name was Johnson. They were both involved with SNCC. They demonstrated in one of the grocery stores in South Dallas because they were protesting the quality of the service and the merchandise in South Dallas where Black folk shopped, and the prices. I remember, they picked up a watermelon and dropped it. Of course, they were arrested for that. They were put on trial. The trial was held and they were convicted. Matthew Johnson was the other person. Both served some time. Ernie left. They brought him back. I also remember that because, during their trial, Ernie and Matthew both asked if I would serve as a character witness for them. I did. I did. That was also during the time that I was running for reelection to the Texas House of Representatives. I testified in their trial. I was a character witness for both of them. Ernie's father was a Methodist pastor, friend of mine. Not only because of that, but because I understood what they were about and what they were trying to do, the meaning of the protest they did. It did create some problems

for me in my reelection, because I had a White Republican that was running against me and his major platform was "Zan Holmes. The man that testified the Black militants. Join hands with the Black folk all over Dallas County." I really thought I was going to lose that race. In fact, I went to bed and I was behind. I told my wife, "We did what we thought was right. If we lose, we lose for the right cause." Early that morning, early in the wee hours, Oscar Moses in the Senate, white senator, very liberal senator. He called me up and he said, "Zan, congratulations. You won." I said, "I won!?" Well, you know, a lot of the Black boxes didn't come in till late during that time. That's what happened, those Black boxes came in and I won. That was related to, again, my relationship with SNCC. My office was in the basement of Warren Church. Intentionally put it there, inside Dallas. All of those organizations, SNCC, the Black Panthers, all of them came through my office. I knew all of the players, and supported them as best I could. I understood what they were



about and they were part of the Civil Rights struggle. Here in Dallas, a lot of folks said there weren't demonstrations in Dallas, but some of that was going on. Some of the protests were happening and they happened to shape some of the Civil Rights Movement here in Dallas. Those organizations, I think, we really to recognize them and the vital role that they played in protesting and calling to our attention some of the injustices that we were experiencing.

Price: Describe the attitude and the position of both African- Americans and European Americans when Dr. Martin Luther King came to Dallas.

Holmes: That was also a critical time and an important time in Dallas. I must give credit to Reverend Red James who knew Martin Luther King Jr. and was very instrumental in wanting to bring Dr. King to Dallas for a voter registration rally. Politically, Red James did not have support among the African-American clergy. The reverend was very independent. He was very articulate and he had a nice sized ego. He was in Virginia when he came to pastor the whole

church and he just could not get any support from the rest of pastors. I recall three pastors who worked with Red and helped him pull it off. Earl Allen, the same Earl Allen that I said helped CORE. Reverend George Moore, who was the United Methodist preacher, and myself. The three of us, we really helped plan and pull it off. That was the first time I met White Walker. White Walker was the last person--Reverend White Walker Baptist preacher. He was the last person that came down to help us. Dr. King did come. There were people in this community, even some of the ministers and other leaders, who did not support that rally. I think that the two things that were going on then--there were some ministers who were opposed to Dr. King because there were factions in the Black Baptist Convention and Dr. King was part of the more liberal group [unclear] and there was a more conservative group of pastors and that was a great battle that was going on in the Baptist Convention in terms of the role that they played in the struggle for Civil Rights,

particularly when it came to demonstrations--  
the kind of demonstrations that Dr. King was  
leading. You had that political thing, church  
thing, because there was a search for  
leadership in the convention. I think, because  
of that struggle, there were some people that  
were opposed to Dr. King because of that  
reason and because they didn't support the  
idea of demonstrations, the approach that Dr.  
King was using. Therefore, there was not much  
support for him that night. It was in Fair  
Park, half full. Half filled. I remember  
[unclear] was there. He was sent to represent  
Dallas Baptist under the Denomination of  
Ministers Alliance. He was not the president  
at the time--

[Video stops]