

Oral History Collection

Peter Johnson

Interviewers: Dr. W. Marvin Dulaney and Alfred L. Roberts

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Place of interview: Dallas, Texas

Dr. Dulaney: This is part two of our interview with Peter Johnson of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference here in Dallas, Texas at ICDC [Innercity Community Development Corporation] on September 21, 2011. You were talking about--I got to remember what we were talking about--oh, we were talking about some of the things that you--well we were talking about you being cited and called

out for the boycott of Dallas 1991 and you said you weren't here.

Mr. Johnson: No I--the way--after the George Allen confrontation and my anger with Jesse Price and coming to the realization that, 'Can't do this.' We got to first turn and take a look at this enlarged [?] system. And then my anger with why I hadn't done this before because this is kind of established law now. So we began to talk to people about how unfair and discriminatory the law system is. And at that time the oligarchy, the Citizen Charter [?] they controlled--. First everything was elected at large. The legislature in Texas, in Dallas--the county officials--everybody was elected at large. And that it was in conflict with the principle of the Voting Rights Act, an establish law that we had already established through the Supreme Court. This was discriminatory and denied minorities the ability to represent themselves. We should go in front of the court and challenge this. And began to really talk seriously and even had workshops to educate people about what they--

what are the principles of the Voter Rights Act. But we were being challenged on Operation Breadbasket. People would hear about Operation Breadbasket and we had Operation Breadbasket big posters in barber shops and beauty shops and black nightclubs. And people would come to my office looking for baskets with bread in it because there was no program for people who was having problems feeding themselves. So people--poor whites, blacks, Mexicans would come looking for food help from us. And we would explain to them Operation Breadbasket--we ain't got no bread in no baskets. This is not--this is an economic--. And black people would cuss us out. "What the god damn hell you advertising for you son of a bitch. You guys got the baskets, where's the basket?" [Laughter] These guys, they would come and [unclear] give us a good cuss out because we didn't have it. The more Operation Breadbasket got visible, the more requests we would get from people--especially old people who would run out of food. A [unclear] named Ruth Jefferson who is dead now, who was a welfare [unclear]. Ruth talked me into going to the west

Dallas projects, visiting families. And it blew me away. I talked to elderly people who ate cat food and dog food the last week of the month. I saw little children--one of the things the Poor People's Campaign had taught us how to do was to recognize malnutrition in children. I saw little children with protruded stomachs, protruded navels that was obviously suffering from malnutrition--living in squalor. [Taps on table with hand.] Now my program was Operation Breadbasket, so I can't--this is what I'm supposed to be doing. This is what SCLC had given me permission to do in this part of the country is economic development in the community. So I go back to Atlanta for our monthly get together and I explain to them what's going on and people have misunderstood our Operation Breadbasket and they coming to me asking me for food and, "Can I change courses and address this?" Big argument erupts between our board people. Joseph [unclear] was chairman of the board at that time. Just like a brother. I just loved him dearly. I mean he's in his nineties, but this has been a--my heart goes

with him. And Joe [unclear], "If we let you do this you have to continue economic because we're trying to establish businesses and get good jobs for people. This is what you supposed to be doing in the cities, in the urban communities. But if you want to do this you have to continue your Breadbasket business of economic development." So we came back to establish an Operation Breadbasket research committee on hunger and malnutrition. And I had a very dear friend here-a white girl who was a PhD sociologist. I had known Caroline. Caroline was a student at Berkley during the Berkley free speech movement. Part of the kids would come down to the south and work with us during the summer months. And I know Caroline very well because she was out there at Berkley with us. She was very close to me in terms of a friend. Caroline agreed to chair the research committee on hunger and malnutrition. Because a part of what SCLC had taught us how to do was research is important because data and information can be used as a weapon. You see you can take data and information and just beat people up with it.

So we established this tremendous research committee made up sociologists-educated people, mostly white people at established--SMU helped a whole lot. Couple of professors out there. And to take an analytical look we got Southwestern Medical School and there was a black doctor's group. Does a black doctor's group still exist? CV [?] Women's Society. We got the doctors to work with us on establishing if we have a malnutrition problem with children in certain sections of the city [then] we need to establish this. So J.H. Page, Dr. Page chaired that committee. Every child came to the black doctor's office would be checked for malnutrition and documented. So we began to develop a strategic plan to address hunger and malnutrition. Now at that time there was no national hunger programs in America. The government had something called Commodities where if you qualified, once a month you could get some cheese and some powdered milk and stuff like that.

Dulaney: Beans and potted meat.

Johnson: Potted meat, yes. This Commodities program--There was a United States Senator named Frank Church, I think Frank is dead now, who chaired the committee on hunger and malnutrition in Washington. We knew Senator Church and I had a number of discussions with Senator Church and Senator Mondale about what I was running into [in] Dallas. And it was just kind of, "Ahh, Dallas is a rich city. This can't be true." And I said, "This is what we're finding." So we did well. Bishop [unclear] allowed us to have a retreat out in Notre Dame which is in the West End of Dallas separate kind of in the woods. A retreat placed there that has dormitories, kitchens, and everything. So I took my staff and some of my board members for four days of prayer and planning. It took planning [unclear] hunger and malnutrition. And at Notre Dame. And came back with a plan. First we were going to establish--I wanted to embarrass the city by making visible the problems with hunger and malnutrition. So the way we would do this is we'd feed people. If you needed food, we'll give it to you. So we established a program of how

to get the food. We went to our [unclear] sister churches, white churches. There was a Jewish man here named Levi Ullom [?]. Levi was the rabbi at Emmanuelle.

Dr. Roberts: Temple

Johnson: Yeah and he and Dr. King was friends. So we went to Rabbi Ullom and told him this is what we want to do. This is what we have found. And the rabbi said, "I will get all of the Jewish temples to have Operation Breadbasket Saturday where everybody would bring non-perishable food." We started the concept of--and then we went to the bishop in the Catholic Church, and the Methodist bishop, and the Episcopalian bishop, and the Lutheran bishop and got the white churches to agree to have a Operation Breadbasket Sunday. Once a month they would have a Sunday where their parishioners would bring non-perishable food. And in each church we had a big Operation Breadbasket basket where you'd drop you food in. And on Monday we had trucks that would go around and pick up the food. And in the basement of Warren Church [Dallas] and the basement of Mt.



Olive church we established a project to store the food and distribute it, but to document who was doing it, so we could--and to do it where the city would be embarrassed by it. We started doing this and little Rabbi Ullom who is dead now, Rabbi Ullom called me one time and said, "Y'all need to come out here and get this food. It's in our way." I said, "Oh Rabbi Ullom I'm sorry." Because Jews would on a Saturday and I would wait till a Monday, Tuesday we'd start getting it. So he was complaining and I got yelled at to "Get this food out. It's in my way." So I sent George [unclear] and a pick-up truck to go out there to get that food out of that temple out there because the man is complaining that it's in their way. So George did call me back and said, "Peter, we're going to need an eighteen-wheeler, probably two." [Laughs] so I go to the Minyards people [Minyards grocery stores] and I said I got [unclear]. [They said], "We'll we can't let you all drive our trucks." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what. We'll send a truck out there and get your food." The truck made two trips, eighteen-

wheeler. That's how much food those Jews had given. But it was more than one temple, but all the food had ended up--and I mean it was just tons and tons of food. I mean it filled up two eighteen-wheelers--made two trips. Then we had to find places to put it. [Laughs] And then get it organized--

Dulaney: So you could give it out.

Johnson: Yes. And that's how we started Operation Breadbasket hunger and malnutrition program. The idea was to make hunger an issue here and make it visible and to make it a national issue. Utilizing our friends in Washington-Senator Church and Mondale and Edward Dreckson (Everett Dirksen?) who was in the United States Senate. But we began to feed people and document it.

Dulaney: The oligarchy didn't like it did they?

Johnson: They hated it. They hated it. In fact if you go through-- rich white people would say, "If anybody hungry they can come here and we'll feed them." Just foolishness as opposed to saying--and because we put together a hunger management manifesto

and went into the white churches. One Sunday we showed up in white churches and took over their pulpit and read the hunger manifesto. In First Baptist Church [points to indicate here in Dallas]. Disrupted their service, you know. Walked right in there with our black leather jackets on [Laughter] and read our--and then the hunger manifesto became published all over the world. And it had all of the documentation of hunger and malnutrition--and what it was causing, how it was affecting children in school. And we got the [unclear] boys out in California. [They] took our research and establish the free breakfast program. Bobby Seals and those boys. And [unclear] started feeding children in the ghettos--for breakfast. Because a part of what we had found is that children that go to school hungry cannot pay attention. They're sitting there with their stomachs growling. We had established this through hard, hard research by professional people. So we got our hunger campaign going and we're constantly challenging the institution to take this seriously and to come up with some

kind of programmatic [unclear] to address this. Senator Church took our research and called hearings in Washington on hunger and malnutrition. The Minyards people gave me four truckloads of food and Jesse had never been to Texas. Jesse was the director of operation Breadbasket, so we invited Jesse to come down and I was going to use those eighteen-wheelers full of food to publically embarrass Dallas by parking them in west Dallas and [unclear] over here and having Jesse Jackson hand out baskets of food. Publish that on the radio stations saying, "Thousands of people showed up." It was all we could do to keep a riot--[Laughter]. I was so scared that shit was going to get out of hand, especially in west Dallas because more people showed up and it was in line and pushing and I mean just a big mess out there. But it worked. NBC and ABC [Laughs] covered it. And that was Jesse's first trip here--to feed the hungry. And we had changed the culture of Breadbasket to really take a look the hunger and malnutrition, so all the Breadbasket chapters around the nation was beginning to address

hunger and malnutrition. The idea of the hunger fast on the steps of city hall was developed at Notre Dame. Once we would raise this issue to a high level [and] everybody knew that hunger was a problem that's when we would do what we call direct action. We had the law school at SMU to write a hunger ordinance-a city law outlawing hunger in the city. That's how arrogant we was. [Laughs] Marched on the city hall when they had presented this law to the mayor and said, "We want the city to pass this." And so the mayor asked the police to politely put their asses-- [Laughter]. We got put out the chamber and to the steps of city hall and took a seat and stayed there for eighteen days and eighteen nights.

Dulaney: I was going to ask you how long did you stay.

Johnson: Eighteen days and eighteen nights.

Dulaney: You chained yourselves to the doors right, so they couldn't move you or--I saw one picture of you with some chains on.

Johnson: Yes we did, but we wanted them to arrest us. We had-- see in order to arrest me, they had to arrest

everybody that was with me. Dr. William Farmer who was an internationally famous theologian from SMU. Mark Herbener-a white minister, Bishop Shapley [?]-the Catholic bishop. So it was a complicated problem for the city, what to do about this Negro on the steps because we can't just put him in jail and not put the other people in jail. So it created a real problem for the city. And the fact that we were staying there and my friends was coming from all over America. They'd come and spend a day on the steps with me, especially my Hollywood partners. They'd come down here and bring all the press with them and spend the day on the steps with me. The labor unions, my friends at United Auto Workers out of Detroit, [Michigan], they came on a private jet and brought probably three hundred union workers. And I didn't know they was coming. They had just told them we may come and join you for a day. And one evening I could hear the sirens because I'm sitting on the steps and the police has got us all surrounded and I could hear the sirens and when they turned that corner all of these United Auto Workers with their

signs [reading] "We support the fight against hunger and malnutrition" and led by--I can't think of the man's name--he took Walter Reuther's place--but the president of United Auto Workers. They came. So I was getting messages from all over the world of people who was taking the day to fast with me. Literally from all over the world the people was going to fast with me for a day.

Dulaney: Did the mayor ever react or respond to what you were trying to do?

Johnson: Well yes--

Dulaney: I know they put you out of the chamber.

Johnson: But then they said that because--across the street from city hall--the steps that I was sitting on was a parking lot that was upstairs. We had been there probably three days before they had arrested a man with a rifle up there. [Laughs] This is when they said, "You going to have to stop this because we don't want no bloodshed on the steps of city hall." We said, "No, let them shoot us." We--Pancho is dead, [Francisco]

Pancho Medrano who was very dear to me. I had met Pancho on the streets of Selma, Alabama. I preached Pancho's funeral. I was the first black preacher to do a funeral at that cathedral in downtown Dallas. Because Pancho put it in his will and his children insisted. But Pancho came to me one day on the steps. He was coming to join me periodically. He was a United Auto Worker-union man. And this was his idea. He said, "Out of the New Testament, Peter, the fishes and the bread. Let's give the mayor and city council three loaves of bread and three fish and tell him and tell him to go feed the hungry." So Pancho went and bought the fish and the bread. And we marched in the city hall in the chamber meeting that day and presented to mayor with this New Testament [unclear]. And he got so mad. The mayor had a hearing problem, so he had hearing aids. He got so mad he took his hearing aids out so he wouldn't have to hear me. [Laughter] He snatched them out.



Dulaney: Two more points and we're actually going to have to wrap up because we have another one. African-American Men against Narcotics.

Johnson: A-A MAN.

Dulaney: Yes. How did you get that started?

Johnson: The dope dealers was just terrorizing our neighborhoods. I mean, just terrorizing our neighborhoods. Then the dope addicts was breaking in on our senior citizens. People were having to put bars on their windows. If the house catch on fire you can't get out. So we knew we had to do something about this. We met at Aldersgate [Church] [?] with the leaders of the Muslims and with some black preachers and said, "We need to challenge these dope dealers." And then they had Mark's wife--they had raped her one day. Mark [unclear] wife. So we knew we needed to stand up to the dope dealers. And the police department [sighs] kind of wanted to ignore this problem and they would say, "Well, we don't know what to do." You can stop a ten year old kid on the street and he can tell you where the dopes being sold, you know. So we

organized African-American Men against Narcotics, me and Fred Bell and a couple of Muslim imams and began to go to dope houses. And we also began to take pictures of license plates of people going to dope houses. We would use our friends in the police department to find out who owned that car and put their name in the newspaper, that John Doe was here at the dope house at this address on such and such a day on such and such a time. I wonder if his wife know. So we just began to really harass the dope dealers and let the dope dealers also know that if you shoot at us we ain't the police. We don't play by--we ain't got no rules and no regulations. Don't dare shoot at one of us. And every time we would go to a dope house we'd have two or three vans full of people with guns. See, if you shoot at one of us you ain't going to like what happens to you. You going to call the police. So we ended up closing down a lot of dope houses and that's when the police department really embraced us and the FBI embrace us because of what we was doing. But the problem was the dope house--we'd close the dope

house down here and the dope dealer would move over here. If we'd close this house over here he'd move over here. So we needed to kill them because we wasn't really changing the sale of drugs, we was just running them out of one neighborhood and they'd go to another neighborhood. Two or three months later they'd be established again. But it was something that I'm very proud of because it was the first time Christians and Muslims was working together in the community. And then other communities-- Washington D.C. established African-American Men--you know black preachers and Muslims working together in the city, in D.C., to chase the dope dealers out. In Watts [Los Angeles neighborhood] they done the same thing. So it established a mechanism for us to begin to address our problem of proliferation of dope in our community. And I'm still friends with most of those Islamic boys. Some of them I've known a long time now. We've done a lot of dangerous things together with dope dealers.

Delaney: What would you change if you had to do all this over again? This gives you an opportunity to reflect on all of it.

Johnson: I'd like to have some money. [Laughter] Marvin Robinson who I've known since my high school days. Marvin told me one day--Marvin used to work for a poor boy name Rodney Rockefeller. And Marvin told me one time--because it was hard to get me to listen to reason. Marvin said, "Peter,"--because I'm single--"you need to start thinking about your future. And you need to start planning for your future. And what you going to do with your life to make a living?" I thought, 'Screw you Marvin. This is what I'm going to do.' And I should have listened to him because I was not smart enough or wise enough to understand what he was trying to get me to pay attention to. Bob Wilson-Reverend Wilson who used to pastor--

Roberts: Saint Johns.

Johnson: --Saint Johns. Bob and Dr. King were friends. See I knew Bob Wilson before he come to Texas. He was pastor--I think it was called Bethel in

Jacksonville, [Florida]. We ran Jacksonville movement out of his church-Bob Wilson's church. I've known him a long time. Bob tried to get me to understand that, "We going to help you get established and we going to help you get a church." Well, I didn't want no church. [Laughter] So I wish I would have listened to people like the Reverend Wilson and other people who had my interests--that I did not understand.

Dulaney: Okay. Well, what about some of the activism? Any of that that you would change or not do? Do differently?

Johnson: There was a lot that I would do different because everything was a learning experience. It was all trial and error. We didn't--none of us knew what the hell we was doing. You try this and it works then you try this over here and if it works you can see if this over here. So there are a lot of things that I wish--

Dulaney: Give me an example. I'm going to pin you down.

Johnson: Okay. The people we helped do business, get contracts--we would ask them to help Bishop College at

that time, help the Black Chamber, "Y'all ought to join the Black Chamber." But we never really said, "You ought to help us." That we're going to make these people do business with you, you all ought to help us. I wasn't wise enough to understand about that. God has been good to me because I always had people like Bill. I had Dr. Dorsen [?], Judge [unclear], some of those men who--Tony who was really, really in my corner. The years I spent in the rest of the south before I came to Texas--there are a number of things I wish we wouldn't have done that we did. There's a whole litany of stuff. To give an example let's talk about [unclear] districts. I left the steps of city hall twice while I was on that hunger fast. One was to go in the federal court and file a lawsuit against the city of Dallas at large system. The other one was to go speak at a convention. That's the only times I left the steps during the hunger fast. The lawsuit I filed against the city of Dallas got thrown out because I wasn't a citizen of Texas. SCLC was considered a foreign company doing business in Texas. I almost went to the federal penitentiary

because of that. Because a part of--here again in the civil rights movement there was the serious men and there was us. And no matter what we was doing there was always some foolishness somewhere. A part of what we done was--we voted in more than one place. For instance my home town I voted. I voted in Atlanta. I voted in Baton Rouge [Louisiana]. The joke--Jean Bond can tell this story--the joke was we going to catch up for all the times they wouldn't let us vote. [Laughter] It was just foolishness. The idea was who can vote in the most places. So I'm voting here. I'm voting there. Just bullshit. Just foolishness, childish, immature games that we played. And that backfired on me because--and a federal judge sent for me one day and said, "Peter, let me tell you something. The city of Dallas is going to have you indicted for voter fraud"--this is after I filed this lawsuit-- "because they found you voting in more than one place, more than one state." [Laughs] "They going to prosecute you." I spoke with the city attorney and they had done this research. And this lady told me she said, "Now, what I want

you to agree to do is agree to drop that lawsuit and I'm going to make them agree not to prosecute you." And she said, "Once we agree on all of that--I want you to wait a couple of days, find some local Negroes who are willing to file the same lawsuit in their name." We got [unclear], Francis Harris, [and] I think Ruth Jefferson. But we went and got some local people born and raised here. The judge forced them to agree not to prosecute me if I dropped the lawsuit and we did. That lawsuit took twenty-five years because every time we'd win it the city would appeal it. What Henry Tatum [?] was talking about--I was against the black leaders--Zan Holmes and other people making this deal with this city because it was going to jeopardize us across the south. If they established this in Dallas they going to cause us problems all over the south where we've already won some of these battles and this can unravel. I had our national lawyers--I would warn them, "If Dallas ends up in a supreme court and the court rules that the ten, four, eight, whatever foolishness they had here--



Dulaney: Four, one

Johnson: --is okay. This is going to be a problem for us nationally. So I did come here in 1990. I flew here to give Yvonne [unclear] and Zan Holmes a talking to about this. [Unclear] philosophy was that, "local people fight their own local battles, Peter. We have national stuff to do." I was absolutely against making any deals with this city. But they made that deal. Took twenty-five years [unclear] twenty five years.

Dulaney: Alright. Well Peter we want to thank you very much for taking three hours out of your day to come over and talk to us. This is just great.

[End of Interview]