

**Willie Bolden interviewed by Bob Short**  
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**Reflections on Georgia Politics**  
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**DOCPROPERTY "reference" Reflections on Georgia Politics**  
**Willie Bolden**

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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short. This is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by Young Harris College and the University of Georgia Library. Our guest is Reverend Willie

Bolden, who lived through many battles during the Civil Rights Movements alongside Dr. King, an educator, active member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and a well known citizen of Atlanta. Welcome, Reverend Bolden.

WILLIE BOLDEN: Thank you.

SHORT: You were born in South Carolina but made your way to Atlanta through Savannah.

BOLDEN: Right.

SHORT: Tell us about your early life.

BOLDEN: Okay. And just before starting, I would also like to just for emphasis say that I'm the pastor of the Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church here in Atlanta, 498 English Avenue.

I was born, like you said, in Sumter, South Carolina. My parents decided that they did not want me to grow up on a farm and decided to move to Savannah. When they moved there I was three years old. I understand from my mom that my dad came first and got a job and then three months later after he found some place to stay, he sent for her and for me and that's how we ended up in Savannah, Georgia.

I was educated in Savannah. I developed my Christian beliefs in Savannah. I grew up in St.

Phillip A.M.E. Church. It's now Martin Luther King Boulevard, but when I was a young boy it

was West Broad Street. And it's still there. One of the largest, if not the largest A.M.E. church in Savannah.

My involvement in the movement in Savannah came into play -- believe it or not, I was an ex-Marine and I came home and got a job on the waterfront as a longshoreman. And I said to myself, "Self, there's got to be a better way to make a living than working on the waterfront."

But I didn't know exactly what that would be. So I ended up being an assistant bell captain at one of the two plush hotels. In my young days now, there were only two plush hotels in Savannah. The DeSoto Hilton, and it's still there on Oglethorpe Street, and the Manger Hotel.

Well, as the assistant bell captain I made money every day. So I had money every day. And my second job was shooting pool. I was a nine ball player. And not just your average nine ball player. I was a real good nine ball player. As a matter of fact, when I see these tournaments on television today I say, "Man, if they had that back when I was a young boy I'd probably be a millionaire now."

So that was my other way of making money. But to get involved the movement, every day at 12:00 -- you could set your watch by it -- Hosea Williams would march downtown. There was a park right across the street from the hotel where I work. And there is an Indian Chief statue by the name of Tomochichi. And Hosea would march two or three hundred people every day, Monday through Friday, and where he got these folks from, I couldn't even imagine. But he had them. And he would climb up on Tomochichi and he would talk about the white power structure downtown. And I said one or two things, "Either this man is crazy or he's one hell of a organizer." Come to find out he was both.

Very good friend of mine, but some of the things that Hosea did, it was unbelievable. But I found out that they were going to try to integrate the hotel where I worked. And my job, given to me by the innkeeper, was when the demonstrators come downtown you lock the door. And that's what I did. But when I found out they were coming this particular day, I left the door unlocked and went downstairs. And when I did, the group came in, led by Ben Clark, who was one heck of a organizer, along with some other folk, and they just took over the lobby because they would not let them in the restaurant, nor would they let them check in to the hotel. When they were all arrested then I was summoned to the innkeeper's office and terminated that same day. Now I said, "Oh, man, you mean to tell me I lost my job. Man."

But I lived to find out that that was the best thing that could ever happen to me. And I say that because that same innkeeper who fired me, before it was over, because I got involved with Hosea and the Chatham County Crusade for Voters and we integrated the hotels and motels and the restaurants in Savannah, and that same hotel where I was fired from, Hosea's wife, Juanita Williams and Ben Clark and myself integrated that hotel. And I insisted on the innkeeper who fired me to check me in.

And of course we didn't sleep all night. We kept in touch with each other. I wish we had had cell phones back then but cell phones were not the thing. We could just call from room to room to make sure that everybody was all right. I slept with the chair up against the door, not only all the other locks, to make sure that nobody could come in. Didn't feel comfortable sleeping. I think we all went home when we checked out the next day and went to bed and got some sleep. But I enjoyed being able to check into that hotel that terminated me.

Now, how I met Dr. King. I met Dr. King in a pool room. The pool room was called Charlie Brown's Pool Room on West Broad Street. All of that now is torn down. West Broad Street -- Martin Luther King Jr., the street today is nothing like it was when I was a boy coming up. You had clubs from Broad Street to 37<sup>th</sup> street in Savannah. I mean nice clubs. Because you see, you had the Air Force base there and the Army base just a few miles away. Ft. Stewart. All of the soldiers came to Savannah on liberty. And at the end of Montgomery Street you had Hunter Air Force Base, so all the airmen would come to town. So, they had to have some place for them to go and so they had a lot of clubs.

So Hosea had invited Dr. King to come to Savannah. And this particular day I was in the pool room playing nine ball and Hosea and his group, along with Dr. King, came in. And Dr. King said, "Brother, you just give me a few minutes; I promise you I won't be long. I just want to talk to you for a few minutes." Well, right about the time he was asking for our attention I was getting ready to bank the eight ball across side, play the nine ball in the corner, and get paid. And I didn't want to hear nothing about what this guy was talking about, you know. So he walked over to me, he said, "What's your name?" I said "What's your name?" He say "I'm Martin Luther King, Jr." I say "I'm Willie Bolden." He said, "I promise you, I'm not going to take long. Just give me a few minutes of your time."

So I very arrogantly took my pool stick and they had benches around the wall, because if you weren't playing you had to sit on the bench out of the way. So I went over and sat on the bench with my pool stick in front of me and he was talking. I act like I wasn't listening but I was listening. And finally, he got through and he said, "Thank you, guys, man, I really appreciate

your time." Well, he invited everybody to come to a mass rally at St. Philip Church that night because he was going to be speaking. And so when he and Hosea and the crew left I got back over the table, I banked the eight ball cross side, I played the nine in the corner, I got paid. So, later on that night I was home. Man, Bob, my pockets was swolled up like they had the mumps. I mean I had a good day in the pool room, right? So I went home that night to take my bath. And we didn't have showers like we have today. I took my bath in a number 310 tub. Some of the people who'll be listening to this tape would not even know what a number 310 tub is, but that's what we used to wash clothes and everything back during those days. So I took my bath in my number 310 tub and got dressed up for the evening. And while I was in the tub, it was strange, because I could hear Dr. King talking about how we were beating each other out of the little bit of money that we had. When, in fact, the man who was really robbing us was several blocks down the street at City Hall and at the County Commission and in the County Commission Chambers and sitting up in these suites. And I said, "You know, I think I'll go hear that guy tonight and see what else he's got to talk about."

But I didn't want the boys to know that I was going to go to the church. So when I got ready to go, I lived on the corner of Anderson and Burroughs, I walked down Anderson Street to Montgomery Street, which is the street past West Broad. Then walked up Montgomery Street and back to West Broad Street so I could get to St. Philip Church which sat on West Broad and Hall Street. And I went in there, people were all -- I know the pastor of that church wished that people were there every Sunday like that -- people were all over the place. I mean in the rafters, up in the balcony, all around, standing all around. I said "Jesus Christ, all these folks."

So I just kind of leaned back on the wall and I was listening. And I watched this guy Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He had everybody in the palm of his hand. At will, he picked folk up out of the pew and sat them down at will. I had never heard nobody speak like that before. And I'm learning on the wall and all of the sudden chill bumps start coming on me. And I said to myself, "Self, a man is not supposed to make another man feel the way this man is making me feel. That's just not supposed to be." And when he finished, folks started lining up around the wall to go shake his hand. And I went and got in line and when I walked up to him and I stretched my hand out to shake his hand he stretched his hands out and when our hands met it felt like I had cotton in my hand. I was scared to give him a real firm confident shake. I just squeezed his hand just a little bit.

But the thing that got me, Bob, was this: he say, "Willie, I'm so glad you came." Now, I don't know how many folk this man had met, but how could he remember my little ol' Willie name? And I must admit that it made me feel pretty good, right? A guy like this remembering me. About three weeks later Hosea told me Dr. King wanted me to come to Atlanta. I said "For what?" "Well, he might want you to talk about working with him." I said, "Now, Hosea, that's the non-violent movement. I know yours is non-violent, too, but you know, we don't have folks spitting on us and we don't have folk slapping and hitting on us because we don't have that kind of violent movement. Only thing happening to us in Savannah was we got locked up, okay? " And I said, "Now, Hosea, you know I'm an ex-Marine and if somebody spit on me, if they have a lip when it's all over with, it's going to be a miracle. Beause I'm not letting anybody, I don't care who it is, spit on me. And Lord knows, you know I ain't going to let nobody hit me and I

not hit them back. So, you tell Dr. King that, you know, I can't handle that non-violent stuff." He said, "Well, I tell you what, Bolden" -- 'cause he always called me Bolden -- "you tell Dr. King yourself." He gave me a flight check, what they used back then. All I had to do was go out there and sign my name to it and give it to 'em and get on the plane and go to Atlanta and when I got ready to come back take another check, sign on it, and come back to Atlanta. He gave me one for going, one for coming.

I came to Atlanta, met with Dr. King at 334 Auburn Avenue. That's where the National SCLC Headquarters was located, right on the corner of Hilliard and Auburn Avenue. His office wasn't nowhere as large as this office is. I mean his office really was like a little closet, had a very small desk and his chair and had books all around naturally, and one small sofa over on the wall. And I met with him and he told me that he'd like for me to come work with him. And all that stuff I told Hosea, I could not get it out of my mouth to tell him. I don't know why. As a matter of fact, I'll be quite honest with you, I was a bit nervous sitting in there with him. And I remember him asking me, he said, "Do you have a Bible?" And I said, "Yes, I have a Bible." And he gave me -- and I still have it -- a book on Mahatma Gandhi, the master of non-violence. And he said to me, "Willie" -- he always called me Willie -- he said, "Willie, we're going to turn this country from upside down to right side up with two books: one, the Holy Bible and two, Mahatma Gandhi. Read and study both of them."

It was three years before I went back home. I had to have my mom pack up my stuff and send it to me on the Greyhound bus. That's how I got involved in the Civil Rights Movement from Savannah, Georgia.

SHORT: What was your first experience in the movement after you joined SCLC?

BOLDEN: Now, my first experience was to go into town. Andy Young -- well, at that time, before Andy came it was Wyatt Tee Walker. He was the executive director. He and Andy, they all worked closely together. But primarily, my job was wherever Dr. King was going into a movement, my job was to go in and make sure that the people knew he was coming. I had to get out, make sure that thousands of leaflets would be distributed, that churches would be notified, that the people in the community knew that he was coming. My job was to get the town ready for Dr. King. And I did that in several cities. That was my primary job. But I felt like I had more to offer than just making sure that some leaflets and stuff got put out. You know, I felt like I was a leader in my own right. I mean even back home in Savannah I was a leader, you know. And I felt that I had much more to offer.

And I remember saying that in a meeting, I said, "You know, I can do a lot more than just make sure there's some leaflets. But anybody can go to town and put out some leaflets." And that's when they assigned me to Hosea. And Hosea started me with voter registration in Albany, Georgia. And I went to Albany and I stayed in Albany over a year on voter registrations.

I had several run-ins with one of the meanest police chiefs you'd want to meet by the name of Pritchett. He locked me up two or three times. And I remember on one occasion I took some people down to the courthouse to get registered and they wanted us to leave and I told the folk we weren't going to leave. And I was standing up on the -- it had a little, I guess you'd call it an

edge, going up the steps to the courthouse. And I was standing up on that because the people could see me as I talked to them. And he slapped me off the edge on top of a car and I guess he thought that I was going to get up and leave, but fortunately, I didn't hurt myself. Did more damage to that car than I did myself. And I got up and went back and stood right back up on that same stump and kept on talking and the people never left. So he had his folk to lock me up. And I stayed in jail a couple of days and a lawyer by the name of C.B. King, Slater King's brother, was the one who came and defended me. And the guy who went on my bond was a black business man there who owned a beauty supply company called Chapman Beauty Supply. And he was the one that went on my bond and got me out of jail. And C.B. King was the one who represented me in court. And if my memory serves me correctly, I was fined something like \$100 for failing to obey a police officer. But we registered hundreds and hundreds of voters in Albany during my stay there at that time.

SHORT: Dr. King was also arrested in Albany wasn't he?

BOLDEN: Oh yeah, he was arrested in Albany. J.T. Johnson, there were a lot of folk from the movement who were locked up in Albany. And C.B. King, the one who represented us, even today the federal courthouse in Albany, Georgia is named after attorney C.B. King, in Albany, Georgia. I went down. The wife and those and invited me to come down to the ceremony. And it's downtown Albany. C.B. King Federal Building. So you see a lot came out of what we did that the average American don't even know about. They may have heard the name but I doubt if

anybody, well I wouldn't say anybody, but there are very few people outside of Albany would know that the guy who stood our bonds and fought for us in the courtroom had the federal courthouse named after him. And he also ran for governor. He was a guy before his time. He was a brilliant lawyer. A brilliant, brilliant lawyer.

SHORT: So what happened after Albany?

BOLDEN: After Albany I think my next move was Social Circle, a little town about 30, 40, maybe a little more than 40 miles east of Atlanta. There was a white teacher and a black teacher who became friends. Both were females. And they were terminated, both of them, because they would not sever their relationship and they supported each other, and they were good teachers. But you know, when they want to find a way to terminate you they will find a way. So, they found a way and terminated them. They brought it to SCLC, so I was assigned to Social Circle to see what could we do to get their jobs back.

So I went in and started organizing the community along with some other staff from SCLC. And we stayed there in Social Circle over a good year, because we pulled kids out of school. We closed the schools down in Social Circle. And we were marching every day. The state patrol, they had as many as 20 to 25 state patrols assigned -- they would follow me -- I thought they were my escorts because everywhere I went there were one or two state patrols behind my car. They knew my car. They knew when I left. They would follow me from Social Circle back to Atlanta. And they would stop out there on 20, and when my car headed back to Social Circle

they would pick me up and follow me. Well, I didn't mind that because I said "As long as the state patrol is following me then I don't have to worry about the Ku Klux Klan following me." So, I say "They don't know it but they are really doing something to help me." So I almost wanted to call them and say look, "I'm getting ready to leave", so they could come behind me and follow me.

But we stayed there for about a year and that particular city received at the SCLC National Convention, they received the Affiliate of the Year Award because of what was going on. Because not only did it affect Social Circle but it affected many of the other little cities around, like Lincolnton and Washington, all the way over to Monroe. The movement just started spreading like throwing a rock in the water and you see the ripples going out. So, it was a catalyst for a lot of other movements in and around Social Circle. As a matter of fact, that's where I was when Dr. King was assassinated. I was meeting with the leader and the treasurer and the leadership of the Social Circle Movement at the president's house when it came over the TV that Dr. King had just been shot. And I said "man." I mean everybody just stopped. I mean we couldn't do or say anything.

And then they showed a picture. I shall never forget it. They showed a picture of Dr. King speaking somewhere and it was like you saw a halo over his head. And I said then to the group, I said, "He's dead y'all. He's dead." Not knowing that he really was dead. Because the news was he's been shot. And sure enough he died. And I remember getting in my car going to Atlanta, trying to get a airplane so I could go to Memphis and they had cancelled all flights to Memphis, Tennessee. And I remember calling the office and speaking to Dora McDonald, who

was Dr. King's secretary, and said, "Dora, I got to get to Memphis. I got to get to Memphis. I got to get" -- she said, "Willie, they have locked. They closed down everything." I said "Well, I'm going to drive." She said, "No, don't drive. You just need to come on to the office." And so, instead -- I'll never forget. It was pouring down rain. I mean it was raining like cats and dogs. And I remember driving on back to Atlanta to the SCLC office that night.

But Social Circle was quite a movement. And then after Social Circle I went to Pike County in Georgia because they had terminated Dr. Glover, D.F. Glover, who served for many years in Atlanta on the Board of Education as an elected official. They terminated him. And the reason they terminated him was because they were going to integrate the schools and Dr. Glover was the principal of the only black high school there. Pike County Mechanical something Industrial High School. So, they terminated him because they were going to merge the black high school in with the Pike County High School, which was the white high school. Now, here's a guy who had been in education almost 15 years longer than the principal at the white high school. Not only that, he had a doctorate in education. He had come up through ranks. He had taught. He was department chair. His experience was 100 times more greater than the guy who was there, but rather than make him the principal of that school, they did not renew his contract. And when they did not renew his contract he got in touch with SCLC and they sent me there.

And I went and we met with them and I'm saying, "On what basis do you have not to renew Dr. Glover contract?" And they just played with words. I said "You terminated the man. You fired him." "No, we didn't fire him. We just didn't renew his contract." "Well, if you didn't renew his contract you got to have a reason. You just can't arbitrarily and capriciously not renew

someone's contract and not give them a reason why." "Well, we just didn't renew his contract."

That's all they would say.

So, what I did, we started organizing the community, organizing the schools. I pulled all the kids out of school, and we marched every single day in that town for about a month. Every day. And we saw where our marching -- we would go downtown to the courthouse, give big speeches -- we saw where we had to up the ante a little bit as we would call it. So we started marching out to the superintendent's house. And we marched out to the superintendent's house. He lived out on the outskirts of Zebulon. So we marched out to his house during the day. And then a student came up to me one day and said, "Reverend Bolden, maybe we need to do it at night." And I said, "you know, I never really thought about that. That's a good idea." So, we marched out there a couple nights. But then that got to be a little dangerous because they started throwing bricks and bottles and several people got hurt.

And that's when I invited A.D. King, the brother of Dr. King. He came to Pike County and he led a march and spoke. But they never did renew Dr. Glover's contract, but we felt like we won because what they tried to do was to keep the high school students who were qualified to graduate that year not to graduate. They didn't want them to graduate. So I got a guy in Savannah -- you probably heard of him -- the only guy I know picket more than Hosea. His name was Reverend Joseph Boone, Joseph Boone. I went to him and talked about it and we organized a graduation class for the students who met all of the criteria's to graduate. But the county didn't want to give them their diploma. So we held our own graduation, gave them our own diplomas, and Bob, every one of them we helped get in college. Every one of them went on

to college and are doing quite well even today. Okay?

So we felt like that was a victory. Now, the other thing that happened in Pike County was we closed down a canning company. This canning company had about a four or five million dollar contract with the federal government to make pimentos and bell peppers and all kinds of stuff for the federal government. And what we did, we organized the picketers with the students. We picketed the company and when that seemed like it wasn't going to work we started organizing the workers who were the parents of the students that we were trying to help. And when we convinced them of what we were doing, they came out of the canning company, and as a result, the canning company lost their contract with the federal government. And they sued me personally for \$1.5 million. I went to Macon, the federal court, and I said to the guy who sued me, "You know, you would have scared the hell out of me if you had sued me for a \$100, but a million five. Where am I going to get it? The best thing you can get is me. Do you want me?" And they finally dropped that case. But that company lost somewhere between three and five million dollar contract with the federal government. So we felt like we had a victory in Pike County because we were able to get those students into college.

Then later I was assigned to Marks, Mississippi. As I told you earlier, that's the only city I ever saw Dr. King literally cry. And he cried because he witnessed a third world city right here in America. We were always talking about going to Africa and going here and going there, the third world. Well, we had one right here in America, a Third World city called Marks, Mississippi. At that time, it was the poorest county in the nation. Listed as the poorest county in the nation. Kids seven, eight, nine, eleven, twelve years old walking around with pot belly

stomachs. You would think that they were there because they were eating too much. The truth of the matter is they were dying from starvation. Their teeth just rotting out. It was nothing to see a ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-old boy or girl walking around with just raggedy teeth or no teeth. You could almost just reach there and pull a tooth out with your fingers because of no medical care.

Well, right about that time the Poor People's Campaign was being organized. And I was asked if I would lead the mule train. Hosea gave me this assignment to bring the mule train from Marks, Mississippi to Washington, D.C. Took us 52 days to do it. I had 16 wagons and about 175 men, women, and children on there. We left out of Marks, Mississippi. The governor of Mississippi directed the state patrol to close down one side of Highway 20 so we could travel through Mississippi. Got to Alabama, the governor instructed the highway patrol, "close down one side of Highway 20, 20 East" so we could continue our journey to Washington. Got to Georgia, Tallapoosa, Georgia, Governor Lester Maddox was the governor. A kindergarten drop out. I almost said a high school drop out but I couldn't give him that much credit. A kindergarten drop out, who was our governor, came out and met us as we were ready to enter into Georgia and said to me, "These wagons and mules will not go down 20."

I said, "Mr. Governor, the governor of Mississippi allowed us to come down 20, the governor of Alabama allowed us to come down 20. Now you mean to tell me my governor in my home state will not allow us to continue our journey." He said, "I don't care what Mississippi did. I don't care what Alabama did. I'm telling you what's going to happen in Georgia." And I said, "Mr. Governor, it's obvious that you don't know me very well. Oh, we're going down 20 one way or

the other. We're going down 20. He got in his car and left." I understand later on he ordered for me to be arrested. They came and locked me up, took me to jail. Andrew Marsette, one of my helpers on the march who knew how to organize, organized the mules and wagons off of 20 and brought them all in downtown Tallapoosa to the jailhouse and said "we're not leaving until Willie Bolden is out of jail." They kept me in jail about six hours and they turned me loose. And guess what? We spent the night there, got up the next morning, and we went down 20 East, came off at Ashby Street, which is Joseph E. Lowery right now, to Hunter Street, which is Martin Luther King. Took a right on Hunter Street to Chestnut, which is James P. Brawley Drive. Well, Dr. Ralph David Abernathy's West Hunter Street Baptist Church sits right on the corner, at that time. And we parked the mules and the wagons over at Clark College football field. And that's where we spent the time until we got ready to go to Washington. Dr. Abernathy and the restaurant across the street fed us.

It was strange because one of the guys who owned one of the restaurants across the street was a number man. Okay? And he had this nice restaurant. And he found out what we had gone through. He fed everybody on that trip a steak, baked potato with all the trimmings, all of us on that trip. I think we stayed in Atlanta a couple of days and then we loaded up the mules, the wagons, put the people on buses, loaded up the mules and wagons on horse drawn buggies, I guess you'd call 'em, and the wagon and we took them to Washington, outside of Washington, and we reassembled everything, the mules, the wagons, put all the people on it, and then we went across the bridge into Resurrection City. And I must admit, and I think I told you earlier, a few tears came to my eyes when we saw all the folk. Because they knew we were coming. And they

were out there to meet us. And they were just cheering us on, you know. Cheering us on. And the other folk on the wagon, they were cheering us on.

And I told you earlier, and I didn't put it in here, but I was given a white horse with a saddle. Never rode a horse before in my life. But I rode that horse that was given to me as the wagon master. They called me the wagon master. And the guy said "if you're the wagon master you got to act like a wagon master. You got to ride like a wagon master." And I remember him saying like that movie that came on back during the day, "Rawhide," "you're going to have to say, Get 'em up! Move 'em out!" And I would get up every morning after we'd have breakfast and got ourselves together, I would go up to the first mule drawn wagon and I'd look and the guys who were helping me would let me know that everybody was ready, and I say, "Get 'em up! Move 'em out!" Oh, it was fun. And the weather wasn't always conducive. We ran into a lot of bad weather. But we made it. But we made it.

And then later on I was assigned to St. Augustine, Florida. That was quite a task there. In St. Augustine we were trying to integrate the hotels, motels, and restaurants. And these movements that I'm talking about may not go in sequence but at least you'll know what they are because in St. Augustine it was in 1964. And everyone knows -- if you don't know I'll tell you -- the Poor People's Campaign took place in 1968. That's when we had Resurrection City in Washington, D.C.

But in St. Augustine, as I stated earlier, we were trying to integrate the hotel, motels, and restaurants. And we were beaten twice a day, because it was twice a day that we would march downtown, march out on the beach, and they would be there ready to jump on us. And on the

weekend they would import the Klan from Florida, Jacksonville, Georgia, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama. They would have the Klan to come over and they would be waiting for us at the beaches. So when we got to the beaches and we got out and they would wait until we got out in the water and then they would come in and jump on us. And the strange thing about it, the state patrol would be standing up on the banks and they would see them out there and wouldn't do a thing. Just allowed them to come and beat us.

But let me give you just a little bit of information about St. Augustine and then we can move on. For those of you who may not be aware, Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama put the 1964 Civil Rights bill on President Lyndon Baines Johnson's desk because of the movements and activities in Birmingham and in Montgomery. There's no question about that. They were the ones who put it on the desk. He took it and put it in his drawer. But it was the movement in St. Augustine, Florida in 1964: those beatings that I just told you about, a man at the Munson Motel throwing acid in the pool and then the next day when we went back and had a six foot alligator in the pool. We would go in the restaurant and they would bring the coffee and then just pour mounds and mounds of sugar in it. Or we would order food and they would come back with salt just stacked up and pepper stacked up on the food to the point where you couldn't eat it.

But it was during St. Augustine, Florida's movement that Dr. King's house was shot up. A family out of New York allowed him to stay in the house in St. Augustine while we were there. And they literally shot that house up trying to kill him and anybody else who was in there with him. And because of that movement, Lyndon Baines Johnson took the 1964 Civil Rights bill out, put it on his desk and signed it. That's how we got that.

Marion, Alabama. The night Jimmy Lee Jackson got killed, Dr. King was supposed to go to Marion, Alabama that night because we had just found out that James Orange was arrested and beaten in Marion, Alabama. He couldn't go. So he sent me and about five other guys. I think it was Henry Brown Lee, "Big Lester" Hankerson, Jimmy Lee Wells, myself, and one other person. I can't think of who that person is. But we went there. We had a big mass rally that night. And I spoke. And we were getting ready to march out of the church to march down to the courthouse and then eventually over to the jail where they had James Orange. But when we got there the media was all over the place. And the sheriff and all his folk were there. But before we could really get the march on the way outside the sheriff summons one of his henchmen to come and grab me. And he grabbed me up by my jeans and carried me over to the sheriff and the sheriff said, "What's your name, nigger?" And before I could say anything he took his pistol and stuck it in my mouth and cocked the trigger back and said, "If you breathe, nigger, I'll blow your so and so brains out."

Now here I am looking at him and I'm trying to say to myself, "Self, don't breathe." And I'm just looking at him and he's looking at me and he's calling Dr. King all kind of names. "Dr. Coon" and "you one of these outside agitators who came into town and upset my negro – my niggers." What -- he didn't call them niggers. "Niggerettes" – "and upset my niggerettes." "I ought to blow your so and so brains out." And he finally snapped it out and when he did the end of the barrel of his pistol hit my teeth and cracked it. And then he hit me in the head, busted my head, and then say, "Lock your so and so ass up." And they jumped on the marchers and that's the night Jimmy Lee Jackson was killed, trying to protect his mother. And they took me to jail,

along with many others, and as we got to the jail they were taking us upstairs we could see blood all over the floor, going up the steps where they had not only beaten James Orange but they had beaten some other folks who went to jail with him. So, Marion, Alabama was a tough movement.

And of course, the march on Washington I was fresh out of jail in Savannah. I had been in jail for about five days. Hosea had been in jail 55 days. He refused to come out. But I came out of jail and helped organized the group that went to Washington, D.C. during the march on Washington. And of course, as I stated earlier, the mule train was a part of the Poor People's Campaign in 1968 when Dr. Abernathy organized Resurrection City in Washington, D.C. Then we had a program called SCOPE, S-C-O-P-E. It stands for Summer Community Organization for Political Education. That was another one of Hosea's projects. That was his baby. He created it. And that program was designed specifically for us who worked with him to go north, northwest, in the west to recruit specifically white students to come south to work on voter registration. Because what was happening in the south was those of us who were of the same hue that the folks were out on the plantation, for some reason or another - I wouldn't say they didn't trust us - but they were a little skeptical about going downtown with us because they felt like we weren't able to protect them. But if the white students would come and say, "Bob, my name is Susan; I'm from the University of Pennsylvania and I'm down here working on voter registration, and what we're doing, we're traveling throughout the county trying to register blacks" -- we weren't saying African Americans then, we were saying blacks -- "who are not registered to vote, because we know that you have taxation without representation. We know

that you are the last hired but the first fired. We know that you don't have the jobs that others have. And with voter registration, we can change that. So, I'd like to take you down to register."

And believe it or not, they would go. They would go on down there.

And we knew that and found that out from the few whites who were working with us in SCLC.

Guys like Al Lango and Willy Leventhal. They were white guys who worked with us. And they were getting folks and taken them. So, Hosea said, "Well, let's see if we can get the white students from the north, the west, the Midwest to come down to help us with this." And we did.

And we got thousands of them to come. And we went out in Alabama, in Mississippi, in Florida, in Georgia, and began to register black voters. And that's when the black voting power really started kicking off. It was those kind of campaigns that help us, along with Selma, to get the Voters Right Act. Because once we got the voting right act out of Selma, it made it a bit more easier for us to get blacks registered. And I say all the time, no Selma, Alabama, no President Barack Obama. No Selma, Alabama, no Maynard Holbrook Jackson, mayor of the city of Atlanta. No Selma, no Andrew Young, United States Congressman. No Selma, no Andy Young, United Nations. No Selma, no Andy Young, mayor. No Selma, no Shirley Franklin, Mayor of the city of Atlanta.

And then you can just take it outside of Atlanta and just go all over the world. We had less than 300 black elected officials nationwide, if we had that many, in 1965. Today we got over 10,000.

And that's all attributed to Selma, Alabama and the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which I'm glad to say I was on it, both times. The first time, March the 7<sup>th</sup>, and seven days later, March the 14<sup>th</sup>. I was there.

SHORT: Well, tell us about it. What was it like on the bridge on Bloody Sunday?

BOLDEN: Okay. I had been assigned there along with some other SCLC staff members to organize voter registration in Selma. I think it was about four or five of us. And at the same time, SNCC was there also working on voter registration. After Bloody Sunday, we had people coming in and Bloody Sunday was when we attempted the first time to go across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The sheriff and his posse and state patrol, they beat us back across the bridge. Now, Dr. King -- you're right -- was not much in favor of the march at first because he wanted to try some other techniques before we march. But Hosea Williams convinced Dr. King that the march was the best thing for us to do. So, Dr. King acquiesced and said, "okay, we'll march." But the ones who led the march was, the first time was Hosea, John, they were the leaders of the march across the bridge. And that's when they jumped on us and beat us up and pushed us back across the bridge. Then we regrouped and went back and that's when everybody -- I mean people came from all over the world. Because they saw what happened on that first march and all of our sympathizers came.

And prior to that, we had had not only the killing of Jimmy Lee Jackson in Marion, but we had two whites killed right there in Selma. One was a priest, whose name escapes me at the moment. I was trying to think about it as I talked, but the name just won't come to me, and another one. So it was kind of touch and go. But on that second march we took out across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and we were protected all the way to Montgomery. Along the way we had all kinds of

celebrities who came and supported us. Again, Harry Bellafonte, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul & Mary, Sidney Poitier. We had all kind of folk who had helped the movement along to come and be with us. And of course, you know, we reach Montgomery, Alabama, and Dr. King gave the big speech on the steps and someone might ask, "then what happened after that?" What happened after that was SCLC started Voter Registration Campaigns all across the country. All across the country.

And even some small towns we started voter registration. You take in Selma, Alabama, where there was not one black elected official. There are now. And so, not only did we target large cities, but we targeted small cities. If you remember, Carl Stokes in Cleveland, Ohio, the first black mayor of a major city. And right after him in Gary, Indiana, Hatcher in Gary, Indiana where SCLC played a major role in getting both of those guys because Dr. King sent staff in to help them on their campaign. So all these cities where you see blacks serving in elected positions, they have to thank the Selma Movement. And those who suffered being beaten, and even after we got the 1965 Voter's Right Act, there were still some cities, and not all of them small cities, where we had a problem getting blacks registered to vote by the administration, by political, by the power structure of those cities, because they knew that once we got blacks registered then we were going to also turn them out to vote and that meant that, hey, they might get caught up in that wheel.

**SHORT:** Mississippi. You led some marches in Mississippi.

BOLDEN: Well my biggest march in Mississippi was Marks. And the next one would be Grenada, Mississippi. Grenada, Mississippi was a violent movement. Again, and that's why I try to tell young people today. We were always able to get a movement going and get it started with the young people back then. We would go into a town and get the young people ready and then after a while we would get the adults. But the young people were the ones who really started the movement. And in Grenada, that movement got to be really violent. As a matter of fact, on one occasion, when the Klan jumped on us and beat us up, we were getting ready to march downtown. I saw with my eyes a guy take his foot and put it between the crotch of a young boy and took his foot, I mean took his foot by his hand and twisted and broke his leg in two places. I mean how could somebody take a child and put your foot between their crotch and take your hand and twist and break it in two places?

And there were several people who got hurt that day. And we went to the hospital in Grenada, Mississippi, and guess what? They wouldn't wait on us. They wouldn't wait on us. They said "Get out of here. We can't do anything." That's when I found out about an all black town on the outskirts of Grenada called Mound Bayou. I had never heard of Mound Bayou. It's an all black city, elected officials, everything, all black. Had their own hospital. And that's where we had to take these injured folk in order for them to get the services they needed for the injuries that they had. Grenada was pretty tough. But weathered the storm. We weathered the storm.

SHORT: If you were asked what future generation should know about the Civil Rights Movement, particularly during the 60's and 70's, what would you say?

BOLDEN: What they need to know about the Civil Rights Movement? They need to know that what they are enjoying today came at a heavy price. A lot of people whom they don't know died. A lot of people whom they do not know have mental and physical conditions today as a result of the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's in order for them to enjoy what they are enjoying today. And they ought not take what they are enjoying lightly. I would say to young people, today the question should be what is it that I can do to make sure that this country does not revert back to the 40's, 50's, and 60's.

And then get involved. Get involved with something. Get involved with some organization. Do some volunteer work. I worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for nine years and the most I ever made was \$25 every two weeks. I was never hungry. I was never naked. I was never outdoors where I didn't choose to be on my own. Because the people who we were helping made sure that we had what we needed. So you ought to get involved.

Secondly, get an education. Go to school. When I came to Atlanta in 1961 there were 125,000 students in the Atlanta public school system. They have less than 55,000 now. And the dropout rate among blacks in high schools are higher today than it was in 1961. In 1961 when I came to Atlanta they had one black elected official on the Atlanta Board of Education. Now we have six. The superintendent in 1961 was white. The superintendent in 2009 is black. But yet, we have more students dropping out of school in 2009 than we had in 1961. Something's wrong with that picture. Something's wrong.

And we need young people to get involved so we can make sure that whatever's wrong gets

straightened out. John Lewis and Julian Bond and Dr. King and Dr. Abernathy and Hosea and Andy and C.T. and Fred Shuttlesworth and Willie Bolden and James Orange and Leon Hall and Lester Hankerson, we were young men. You know, we weren't old. We're old now. But we were young men when we started out in the Civil Rights Movement. And that's what we need now. We need young men. I mean kids are smarter today than my two and a half year old granddaughter came to me the other day and I stretched out in the chair and I felt a charley horse coming in the back of my neck and she got up and came over to me and she said, "Papa, what's the matter? What's the matter, Papa?" And she went over to her mama and said, "Lotion, lotion", and mama put a little lotion on her hand and she came back over to rub Papa's leg. Two and a half years old. Kids are much smarter today. But are they using it?

We texting. And we can't write a full sentence because we text shorthand. Instead of saying Y-O-U, you just put U so you can get a lot of words in there. And as a results, when you sit down to get ready to write you're writing just like that -- U. So can't nobody understand what you're writing.

**SHORT:** What do you think are the most important issues facing African- Americans today?

**BOLDEN:** Education and health. Education, health, and parental involvement.

**SHORT:** What can we do --

BOLDEN: When I was a young man I could not come to my mother's table with no t-shirt on. In my mama's house, when me and my daddy came to the table we had to have a shirt on. And the shirt had to be tucked in my pants. I never saw my daddy in my mama's house with his hat on. Always took it off before he came in the house. But I see folks today sitting up in restaurants, the daddy got his hat on backwards, the son got his hat on backwards, the daughter got her hat on backwards. We have to -- and I know they call it old school but some things we shouldn't throw away. Some things we should maintain.

SHORT: Is there a single spokesman for African-Americans today --

BOLDEN: No.

SHORT: -- as Dr. King was in his day?

BOLDEN: No, and I don't think there ever will be another single spokesman for the black community. And I think maybe the closest person to it today would be our president. But I can't think of any one civil rights leader who can be identified as the spokesman for the black community. Now many of them are speaking out on issues that we certainly have some concerns. Brother Al Sharpton and even Jesse Jackson is a spokesman in his own right. The National Urban League. We have a lot of spokesman now, but don't think we will ever have a single spokesman like we had during Dr. King.

I also think that one of the reason we have a problem in getting the masses of people to get involved like we did in the 60's -- remember, in the 60s nobody had nothing. Nobody had anything. You didn't have nothing to lose. You had everything to gain. But today folk are living in \$3-400,000 homes; they don't want to lose that. They're driving Bentley, Rolls Royce, Mercedes; they don't want to lose that. They're wearing Armani instead of J.C. Penney. They don't want to lose that. So, they are ready to send you a few dollars so you can do it, but in terms of them doing it, they're not going to do that. But in the 60's, didn't nobody have anything. So, it was much easier to organize the masses of folk because we all were in the same shape. Even with the churches, you know, you got the mega churches, with exception of maybe one, you don't see them on the picket line. They will speak out and they'll write you a check. But what you really need is their bodies, you see.

SHORT: The SCLC is in existence today. What now is its main focus?

BOLDEN: Well, I wish I could tell you that. I can't tell you what their main focus is. I think right now SCLC, because it is trying to get a president, and it's hard for SCLC to get focused right now because they don't have a leader. But I think once the leader has been selected and that leader gets his or her cabinet in place and then they can do what Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth and others do what they did. But I just don't think they are really focused right now, and really focused.

SHORT: Well I appreciate you being with us. I'd like to ask you one final question.

BOLDEN: Okay.

SHORT: Have we overlooked anything in your career that you'd like to mention?

BOLDEN: Well, no, except I always make it clear that I worked with Dr. King and I loved him and I could have taken that bullet for him -- I really mean it -- some folks say it and just because it sounds good. But if I could have taken that bullet for Dr. King I would have taken it. I loved him that much.

But my real hero, my real hero -- I have two. And they are my mother and my father. My mother gave me the fight that's in me because that's the way she was. My mom was president of PTA in my elementary school and then when I got promoted to middle school, they called it junior high back then, she was elected president of the PTA. And the elementary school would not let her resign. So she ended up being president of the elementary school PTA and the junior high PTA because she was a fighter. She was a organizer. She liked to get things done. My dad, on the other hand, I got my work ethics from. My daddy taught me the importance of having a job, working, taking care of your family. He taught me about time. He said if you're on time you're late. If you're on time you're late.

So I always have a problem, even at the church where I left and the church here, our Sunday morning worship service starts at 11:00. I'm not coming in the pulpit at 11 or five after 11. I'm

there before 11. I'm there while the deacons are having devotion so when they finish and turn it over to me we'll have a smooth transition. We can move on. Like today, I knew I was supposed to meet you at 11:00. I left home early enough in case I ran into traffic and had to detour where I could be here. I think I got here what? About 10:35, 10:30, 10:35.

SHORT: Yeah, you were early.

BOLDEN: Yeah.

SHORT: You were early.

BOLDEN: Because I got all that from daddy. He was my hero. That's the only thing that I would like to add in here, that because of my relationship with my mother and father, I am what I am today. Dr. King and those just -- and Hosea and Andy and those just helped put the icing on it. But when I was in the raw it was my mother and father who chiseled me and got me ready. And when Dr. King and them got me all they had to do was say let's go; I was ready. Yeah.

SHORT: Okay. Willie Bolden, thank you very, very much.

BOLDEN: Thank you. And I certainly hope that this interview will be enlightening and help those who will watch it. Because what you have seen and heard today is authentic. I didn't get it

off the Internet and I didn't read a book. Everything that I talked about today I witnessed it with my own eyes, and I was there. And again, thank you, Bob.

[END OF RECORDING]

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