

CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Mr. Argus Gene Parks

INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham

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M= James M. Denham ("Mike")

G= Gene Parks

M: This is a new day. Once again, this is James M. Denham and I'm here with Gene Parks and we're resuming our oral history today on Friday, October 30, 2009. And we were just getting started or just finishing up rather your tenure in Miami.

M: And how are you today?

G: I'm doing pretty well.

M: Okay. And we're going to resume our conversations today about your ministry. And can you tell us a little bit about your appointment in Jacksonville and what you found when you came to Jacksonville? And the name of the church there of course was The Lakewood Church of Jacksonville, correct?

G: That's correct.

M: Can you tell us about what the congregation was like, the number of people and I guess the socioeconomic environment that the church was in?

G: Okay. Well, Lakewood is a suburban church with a typical middle class congregation of no major funders. The membership was probably, I'd say 400, 500 something like that. The experience that I had with the congregation was very compatible. We had good friendships and good relationships with one huge exception, that after I had been there for a couple of years, I had begun to be involved with the Civil Rights Movement. The congregation did not bother me about that or there was no -- I didn't spend enough of my time in that to cause any great furor.

G: But as things developed, I think I mentioned this before, I was in a workshop in Atlanta when Dr. King was killed and went to his church to go to the prayer vigil that evening. And when I came home, I put the black ribbons on the doors of the church and I explained that that was in recognizing the loss of a brother in Christ. And the bulletin had gone -- I had put that together before I went to the workshop. It was Palm Sunday and the title was King of Kings. And when I did what I did about expressing the loss the way that I did, there were those who immediately took that and twisted it into being about Dr. King rather than Christ. So that was a real bump in the road in our relationship.

M: Well, that was 1968.

G: Uh-huh.

M: And a little bit of the context before and during the time you were there, nationally, things were kind of unraveling. The 1964 Civil Rights Act had been passed. The 1965 Voter's Rights Act had been passed. And there had been a lot of uproar and destabilization in various states, including Florida. And in St. Augustine in '65 -- '64, '65, there were some serious upheavals. And so in 1966, you were coming into that, and it must have been, you know, very unsettling right then, right immediately when you were in Jacksonville. What was Jacksonville like in 1966, if we can go back a little bit?

G: Sure.

M: And talk about how the civic leadership, the mayor, the city council. How were they dealing with some of those issues.

G: Yeah.

M: And how you, I guess, would have been embroiled or brought into some of that.

G: It's interesting how all of this came about as far as my involvement. It really had its roots in my learning about a new ministry called Urban Ministry. And because of that, it developed into a significant difference on the part of the people in the congregation. But as far as the community was concerned, Jacksonville was pretty much not open to new things. My biggest head-knocking was with the Board of Realtors. We had a section of the city on the north side that there were African-Americans moving into areas around that area. And they, the realtors, were urging people to move out of that area. And they would not show houses in that area to African-Americans. But they were really furious about the conflict and all of that. I became involved in working with some other individuals about the idea of what could we do to be helpful, and we came up with the idea of having when there were blacks that moved into that area, we sponsored a neighbor to neighbor little coffee chat. And we had some very good experiences with that. We had some people who were very unhappy about that.

M: Now, was that within the general boundaries of your congregation?

G: No.

M: That was on another part of town?

G: It was all the way across town. But because of that, because of the realtors, dealing with that area purely in a negative fashion, we mobilized the people who were living there and we asked for the Board of Realtors to come to a meeting to have a discussion with the community. And all hell broke loose. They were absolutely, you know, they hated me.

M: The realtors?

G: Yeah.

M: And so this was a trade organization from in town --

G: Right.

M: And you were trying to create a situation whereby there would be dialogue and they didn't want any dialogue?

G: No dialogue at all.

M: How did they respond, did they say well, we have no problems, we need no meetings, we need no dialogue because there's no problem that exists or how did they -- what was the rationale of their complaint?

G: They simply refused to attend the meeting. We had a large group of people that were waiting for them to come to have a conversation, and they would not do that. And one of the principle leaders in that was a realtor who was a member of the Southside Church which was just down the street from Lakewood.

G: The bishop was in the area and this realtor told the bishop that he wanted me out of Jacksonville, never to be allowed to come to Jacksonville in any responsibility. And the bishop gave him a response that he did not enjoy because the bishop knew, understood what was happening. And he simply dismissed the gentleman.

M: Now, who was the bishop at that time?

G: I wish you hadn't asked me that. I cannot remember that.

M: Well, we can come back to that.

G: Yeah, I'm sorry.

M: So who were the people that you were -- who were your colleagues who were trying to help you and working with you? You certainly didn't do this all by yourself.

G: No.

M: Who were some of the other leaders and what areas and constituencies did they represent?

G: We had clergy from Presbyterian, Lutheran, myself, one Catholic. So we had --

M: So it was primarily composed of religious people that were doing this work?

G: Yes.

M: Were there any African-American leaders as well involved?

G: Yes.

M: They were also church members or church leaders?

G: We did not have a pastor that was a part of that corps. But we had support from pastors --

M: Now, was this '66 and '67 or was it '68, after the Martin Luther King assassination?

G: It was after the Martin Luther King.

M: It was after the Martin Luther King assassination?

G: Yes.

M: So what was the city council and the mayor and the political authorities' position on all of this?

G: As much distance from it as possible.

M: Tried to pretend it didn't exist?

G: Yeah.

M: So did you accomplish anything?

G: We did. As far as that area was concerned, we did make some inroad. Overall, what happened with me was that I became more and more involved with the African American leadership. And we had a group of guys that were determined that they were going to change Jacksonville. Urban League was one of my major partners. And some of us went to Atlanta for a meeting with the director of HUD. We had some issues with HUD. We went to Atlanta. There was a busload of us. Well, I say busload, there was probably 15.

M: So was the NAACP involved in things too?

G: Yeah.

M: As well as the Urban League?

G: Uh-huh. We had set up a meeting with the director, I don't remember his name. But in this meeting, we had him, had our issues pretty strongly presented to him and so on. And what was humorous about it was that I don't remember what I said or how I expressed what I was trying to communicate, but the bottom line was that the heavy hitters after we had that meeting and had our little, you know, sit down and look at how things went, and they were very straight with me that we had him nailed against that wall. And I injected an idea that let him up. It was funny, it really was funny, because it did not affect, you know, except in terms of future strategies. You know, I've got to learn my lesson of when to let him up and when to hold him down, that sort of thing. So it was the relationships that we had were truly, truly brothers in our commitment, The Florida Black (inaudible) was the title of these young fellows. And we worked together for a long, long time in a lot of different ways. It was very meaningful to me in my life.

M: Now, were you in Jacksonville at the time of the actual violence? There were some

actual killings in Jacksonville, racial killings that occurred, I should know the exact dates but I think it was about this time.

G: It was.

M: So that might have been a precursor to what you got involved in perhaps.

G: Yeah, but I'm not aware of -- we had a couple of guys that got themselves into -- that is to say from the black perspective that they went a bit far and they got in trouble over that. As far as physical harm, I didn't actually experience with any violence.

M: Now, in the late '60s, how long were you posted there at that church? '69 is when you left?

G: Yeah.

M: Okay. '69. Did you have any other interaction with any other cities other than Jacksonville that might have led you in the direction of getting involved in urban ministries?

G: The urban ministries idea and all, I may have spoken of this earlier, but Walter Kalaf was the pastor at Southside and the General Conference.

G: Yeah. He was at -- let's back up, and I did speak to this earlier I feel sure -- the General Board set aside money to go to every conference for that conference to respond to the crisis of the cities. And Walter was asked to be the chair of a committee for the St. Augustine District and the Jacksonville. And he invited me to be a part of the committee because we were next door to one another and shared some views. Anyway, the whole process was that in each district or combo district would make a presentation to the Annual Conference of how we would like to use the money, some of the money. And so I simply had read an article about Urban Ministry that was developing at that time and so I shared it with the group. They had other ideas about (inaudible) and they came to the conclusion that that's what they wanted to present to the conference for funding. And so that's how it came to be, just that simple. Then by the time we are -- when we have gotten to that point, my congregation at Lakewood, to their credit, they were never willing to go to the superintendent and say, We want you to move this man. They, in their guts, were absolutely furious with me but they never could bring themselves to say move him.

M: Even after the Martin Luther King --

G: All of that.

M: They let it be known that they were unhappy with you about that but they didn't complain to the leadership.

G: To ask that I be moved. Now, what turned out to be such an interesting thing in my life was that Jesse Waller was my superintendent at that time, I don't know whether you knew Jesse or not. But Jesse said, you know, you're having some difficulties. You had the idea. . . .

M: It has the idea for Urban Ministries. Or you had the idea for --

G: He said, Why don't you take that position? He said, That's what makes more sense to me than anything else. So that's how it happened.

M: Did you have any idea that might happen?

G: No.

M: Did you have any idea that you were proposing something that they might ask you to do?

G: No. But when Jesse said that to me, I then began to say, Yes, that's right. But there was no question for me after that.

M: So you actually established it and had to set up the program?

G: Uh-huh.

M: And did you have a Board of Directors that you called on for advice?

G: Uh-huh.

M: And did you have an office with a secretary and that kind of thing?

G: I had an office but I never had a secretary. The funds were very meager and --

M: Was it in Jacksonville?

G: Uh-huh. I had an office in one of the downtown churches, Snyder Memorial, for a long time. And then for not nearly as long, they needed their space and so I moved into a little building that had some other service agencies in it. But everything was pinch, pinch, pinch. But here's a part of the story that was so enriching for me personally was that because from Lakewood, when they got rid of me, I was still there. And over the years, there were fascinating things that happened. The superintendent asked me one time to do some research for him on the history of Lakewood. And there was a family that had been in that church for many, many years. And they were thrilled when I left. And I needed some information that only someone in their age group and all would know. So I called and I asked them for the information. And the husband answered the phone. And so we had a very, you know, decent conversation and he was forthcoming with it and everything. And when we finished, he said, Wait a minute. He said, My wife wants to speak to you. And she said, I want to tell you something. She said, I was harder on you than anybody else in that church. And she said, I want you to promise me that if you're around, I want you to have my funeral.

M: And this was how many years after you left the church?

G: Several.

M: Five or six years?

G: Yeah.

M: Wow! Did you do it or did it ever happen like that?

G: No, no. As far as I know, she's still, you know, I've not heard that she's deceased. And then there was another dimension that is really idle talk, it doesn't really help us in our mission but we had an attorney who was a member of the congregation, Hudson Oliff. I hadn't been there long enough -- He said, I want to take you to lunch. We went to lunch. And he said, I want to tell you something. He said, I want you to know that as far as black people are concerned, I am going to keep them the way they are, where they are, as long as I can, period. Time marches on.

M: This is while you were still pastor of the church?

G: That's right. Time marches on. I get a couple of hate letters, anonymous hate letters. And Hudson Oliff decides that he is going to run for judgeship. So I didn't get any more hate mail, but I got a letter of apology. And when I got that letter and read it, I was standing beside the sofa in the living room when I opened it, and I just dropped to my knees and thanked God. Assuming the sincerity of the letter, this was not an anonymous letter, it was, you know, Hudson, and his apology about this conversation we had had. I chose to take that in good faith. And he's running for judge. Hello? But I took it to be that I'm going to accept this as real.

G: Sam Jacobson was an attorney in town. He and I had developed a friendship from being at a meeting or two and so we began to work on things together. He's a great guy. He and I had a conversation about people who were arrested and put on probation. And he said, You know, I see people in court all the time. And he said, I see them, those who need to be locked up. I see those who can make it on the street on probation. And then I see this other group who just simply can't function in the probation setting. But we need to have some way of relating to that population. And so he and I then began to massage the idea, and we came up with the idea of a probationer's residence program. In order for that to function, we had to have the judges in sync with us and willing to support it.

M: Now, would this be a system whereby they would live in a dormitory kind of setting?

G: Uh-huh.

M: And be minimally supervised and they would have to check in and move and live in that area?

G: The ground rules were that they had to get a job. They had to save money. They had to report to their officer and it worked like a charm. In time, there were -- at one point, there were 12 of those sites not just in Jacksonville, but it had spread to some other areas.

M: Now, is this when you were in Urban Ministries that you carried this out?

G: Right. Exactly.

M: Now, was it a faith-based system whereby the Methodist Church sponsored it?

G: No.

M: Or was it an ecumenical or was it even religious oriented at all?

G: It was Sam and me.

M: Okay. It was Sam and you. You're a preacher, he's a lawyer.

G: That's right.

M: Okay.

G: Heads up.

M: Okay.

G: In order for us to do this, we have to go and see each judge. And so I said, Okay. I'll go take this one. And he said, I'll take this one. We came to Hudson.

M: I think I know what's coming here.

G: I told him, I said, I can't go. I said, It will ruin it. And he said, Okay. Well, I'll take that.

M: And you didn't tell him why.

G: Yeah, I told him.

M: Or you did tell him why?

G: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He knew exactly why. He came back after he interviewed him. And he said, Gene, don't ever turn your back on him. So that was the truth of the apology.

M: Which it wasn't a truth?

G: Not at all.

M: Now, when you got the letter, did you -- you said you took the letter in good faith. Did you have any communication with him again?

G: Huh-uh.

M: You just kind of took it and you accepted it?

G: I just accepted it.

M: Do you think that he had written those anonymous letters?

G: Yes. No question at all. He had said -- I had heard him say that he composed all of

his own mail on his own typewriter. That was before he was the judge. The letters that I got, there had been a -- what do you call it, it was stationery --

M: Stationery.

G: -- from his office, somebody's office. But that had been blocked out.

M: In the same way, so you could compare it with the other?

G: Yeah. Exactly. But that whole thing played out just as I told you. I had a phone call one day from Sam. He said, I've got a case in Lakeland. I got to come by and see about some property. So we met and had lunch.

M: After you had moved here?

G: Several years after. He said, I want to tell you something. He said, Hudson Oliff is truly the meanest human being I have ever known. And that's the judge.

M: And he continued on the bench?

G: Yeah. Well, it was these kinds of things that happened so many different times and so many different ways. And essentially all my ministry in my whole, you know, 40 years, those years were my years of greatest fulfillment by far because it was what I felt so strongly that God expects of us in relationship to one another. And I had the privilege of doing that and doing that with other people who grasped that too.

M: Well, let's go into that. You obviously traveled a lot probably in this new job. And you had to set up things that were going on and you probably had people you were interacting with in various communities and various different areas, not just Jacksonville. So what were some of the examples and some of those initiatives and places that you worked from it would have been 1970 until 1988; is that right? So if we can just kind of go into that and try to stick to chronological events as close as we can, let's look at some of those highlights.

G: Okay. Well, let me say that once we established the idea of an Urban Ministry through the Conference funding it, then the Conference allowed, and also participated in the development of that ministry, that concept. So I was a part of that development simply because I was the first in that position. But we had several districts, I've forgotten how many there were at the time. We had Miami, we had St. Pete, we had West Palm, Fort Lauderdale and Jacksonville. Those are the ones that really pop out to me.

M: Orlando?

G: Orlando we did have, not as much. But what developed was that the ministries took their own directions, you know in light of the orientation of the Urban Ministry and the circumstances and so on and so on. So we had a strong network of urban ministers who were assigned as I was assigned in these different districts. So our interaction was that we would get together on a, you know, semi-regular basis to do a lot of learning and training ourselves because this was completely new to all of us. We've been preachers in the church and now we're out in a different kind of world. But the one, West Palm Beach, I did mention West Palm Beach; did I?

M: No, I don't think so.

G: I have to tell you, West Palm Beach, an urban minister, her name is Pam Cahoun. She did two internships with me when she was in college. She was from Jacksonville. And she became the urban minister in West Palm Beach. It's called Cross Ministries. And I always played the idea with her, I'd say, Now you keep in mind that I'm the dean, you know, because I've got seniority on everybody. Pam Cahoun has been at West Palm Beach for 25 years.

G: Yeah. And we'll chat every once in a while.

M: So you also were involved during that time with farm workers; correct?

G: Yes.

M: Was that part of the Urban Ministries or was that just something in addition to that?

G: No. The urban ministers did different things in different ways and different places. But we overlapped or joined in various things.

M: Uh-huh.

G: And the farm workers was one of those. I was more of an out-front on it than most of the others. I was not loved passionately by some of the growers in the church. We had some --

M: Primarily orange growers?

G: No.

M: Or what kind of agriculture primarily?

G: Whatever the major farming activity in the state.

M: Truck farming, tomato farming. Not so much groves, orange groves?

G: No. It was really much more of the --

M: Now, where was it mainly located, in south Florida around Lake Okeechobee or also around Lake Apopka?

G: Down in that area. But our coalition spread beyond Methodist. And I think I may have mentioned the Apopka nuns. I believe, as I recall, there were three of them. But semi-regularly we would get together and look and see what's happening, are we accomplishing what -- our focus in that setting was farm workers. And so our, you know, our coalition was anxious to stay on course on that subject. And we did get some ill-will from the grower community. And I can understand that. But at the same time, the reality of life for the farm workers was one that deserved someone standing with them, and we did that. And I remember Cesar Chavez's first -- or the movement's first big breakthrough was when we got Coca-Cola to build housing for the workers. That was

our first big breakthrough.

M: And where was that?

G: I don't even remember where it was.

M: Now, Cesar Chavez came to Florida, what years were those? Can't remember?

G: No.

M: But it was in the '70s I would imagine.

G: Yes. I took Cesar to Jacksonville, and we had -- it was almost an impromptu kind of thing, but we had a small meeting at the church where my office was for folks who were interested in him and what they were doing, so ... And we also had him on television in Jacksonville. So my ties to the farm workers and to the union, it's been ongoing. I continue to contribute to their movement, and it's near and dear to my heart. And it was an honor and a privilege to know Cesar for what little time I had with him.

M: Okay. One of the other initiatives that you were involved in pretty early on is Planned Parenthood.

G: Uh-huh.

M: Can you reflect a little bit about that and how you got involved and interested in it?

G: Sure. Sure. They had a chapter in Jacksonville and the director was a Methodist preacher, Chuck Cairn (phonetic). And because of that connection, I joined the committee and stayed involved with them for a long, long time in Jacksonville.

G: And I think I also mentioned that I came to Lakeland to meet with the chapter here. I don't remember any of the dates and so on. But I came down to give them some insights on what I was seeing. And it was a good experience. And then I was elected to the General Board of Planned Parenthood nationally. And that was also instructive for me. So that's kind of, you know, the way that that all came about.

M: So you were with Planned Parenthood in one capacity or another for how many years?

G: I would say probably five, six, something like that.

M: And one of the people that you interacted with was Lois Cowles Harrison. Can you reflect a little bit about how you met her and what kind of interaction you had with her over the years?

G: I just met her through Planned Parenthood. And they were having some difficulties in their organization and I came down and had sort of a little seminar session with them. So it was not an extended, you know, involvement, it was just they invited me, asked me to come, you know, have some chat. And it was worthwhile. I always have remembered her and appreciated her from that small amount of time that I was with her.

M: Now, was there a woman by the name of Faye Walton that you met in relation to --

G: She was the National Board --

M: -- the National Board of Planned Parenthood?

G: Yes. Yes, I knew her well.

M: Okay. One of the things in your time in the Urban Ministry had to do with law enforcement; is that correct? They solicited your support or your help in helping them about some things; is that correct? Can you kind of go through that a little bit?

G: Yes. Actually, a specific -- in the black community in Jacksonville, there was a real sort of a semi-explosion of actions by young men and things got out of hand. And so the sheriff's office swept them all off the street and took them in across town into a holding facility. And this, as you can imagine, was quite a furor. The sheriff called me late one evening and told me that he was planning to return a busload of these young people back to their community. And he wanted me to be the escort for the bus. And so I drove, it was a night event to keep from being, you know, everybody's -- it was to be as quiet as possible. But I accepted the task, and it was quite an interesting experience. For example, I'm the escort on the ground, but the chopper was overhead. And when we got to our destination and we were ready to begin to get the youngsters back out, the choppers were overhead with their lights, and they provided the light for our whole, you know, the activity that was going on. So it was a one-time event and it was helpful for my relationships within the community of both sides of the street. The one thing that I guess I was successful at was that I was accepted by both sides of the town. The list I gave you of the agencies that -- I was just totally involved in just about any and everything that went on in Jacksonville, and that's not to be interpreted other than it was my ministry and that was played out in all kinds of settings.

M: So just so we understand, these young boys were on a bus and they were being taken and released at a certain spot --

G: Back in their neighborhoods.

M: And they were to be taken back to their neighborhoods, okay. All right. I see. Okay. So did they trust you too, those kids?

G: I got along with -- no, the kids I didn't have any real relationship with. But we had a genuine love for one another in this movement. We truly did. And it was a godsend to me. It truly was. I could never ever imagine an aspect of ministry that would have meant to me personally what this meant.

M: So you were in this position until 1998 when you retired?

G: Uh-huh.

M: And you moved to Lakeland?

G: Moved to Lakeland so we could be with Laura Edwards.

M: Yes. Did you miss it? Did you get up every day and think, wow, I really miss what I was doing? How can I get back into it and what can I do here to satisfy my eagerness?

G: I can tell you what happened. The director of Tampa United Methodist Centers knew me. And I had not been here very long. Her name is Mary Hester. But she came to me with an advisor to her and she asked me if I would be a consultant to TUMC. And I did that for many years. And that filled that spot. It was simply a continuation of the ministry, just in a different way. My biggest accomplishment with them was the development of the SHARE program.

M: I used to be involved in that myself.

G: Did you?

M: Well, just as a -- go ahead, can you talk a little bit about how SHARE, how you were involved in the building of that program?

G: Yes. Well, as I said, I was a consultant to TUMC. They had an interest in SHARE, the idea, the concept. We worked on that. And then we had decided to actually participate, and so we had to have a place. We had two or three people looking for sites. I found the one where they eventually developed the SHARE program. It belonged to an older Baptist man. And he and I just had an interesting relationship. I just sat down in his office and explained what we were trying to do and so on and let's talk about how much we can lease this for and so on. And he said, Preacher, you ought to buy the place. Well, I said nothing but praise the Lord, but we simply don't have the money to do it. So he gave us as good of a lease as we could ask for. Later on, as time goes by, he became ill and I went to the hospital to see him. And he said, If I die, have my funeral. And I did. Those are moments that you just don't ever forget. But I'm glad you were with SHARE. That's neat.

M: Well, we've had about I guess it's three really interesting days. And you've lived a very, very full life with a tremendous amount of incredibly interesting experiences. Growing up in Mississippi and going to California, coming back to Mississippi and going to college at Asbury, going to Vanderbilt Seminary, chaplain at the Tennessee State Penitentiary, the Cuba Conference and then all of your work here in Florida. Do you have anything to say about your life that you think if you were going to try to pull everything together, how would you kind of wrap these three days up?

G: I think without a doubt, it's been just pure fun because it's an opportunity for an old man to reminisce. And you have asked the questions and asked them in such a way that it's been a pleasure to try to think back over them and to respond to them. I'm very, very much aware that each of our lives have so many dimensions to them and it's not often I think that we have an opportunity to reminisce in this context of an opportunity to have a sharing of one's life. It's as gratifying as anything I've ever done really. Because it has allowed me to reflect and to be touched in my own psyche of when these things came up and we talked about them. It's been a wonderful experience. I cannot imagine anything that I would cherish more than an opportunity to reflect on my own life the way that you have managed the process. It's been wonderful.

M: Thank you.

G: Really.