

Interviewee: Locke, Gene

Interview: July 21, 2006

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Gene Locke

Interviewed by: J.R. Wilson

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JRW: It is July 21, 2006. We are here high atop the Chase Tower, the 42nd floor, with Gene Locke who is an attorney here in town, who has lived here most of his adult life and has some stories to tell that we want to record for perpetuity and also, we appreciate you sitting in with me. This is J.R. Wilson and we are recording for the University of Houston's Oral History Project which is a function of the History Department, in particular, the Public History Program with Joe Pratt and Marty Melosi. So, what this program is designed to do is just this – is to record orally the history of our community and particularly while we have folks still available. I think one of the tragedies of certainly the past 50 years is a great many people who made the history that we are now living and the opportunities that we are now living are gone and we don't have their words, we don't have their spoken words and all, so that is very much what this project is about. So, where were you born and when?

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GL: 1947. In the spring of 1947. In the Cullen Wing of Memorial Hospital in Conroe, Texas.

JRW: Oh, is that right?

GL: I was born in Conroe because my mother and my grandparents lived in San Jacinto County and Conroe was the closest doctor and the closest hospital.

JRW: Did an African American doctor deliver you?

GL: No, there were no African American doctors in Conroe, Texas. The nature of racial segregation was such that for African American doctors or lawyers for that matter . . . almost no lawyers, but the doctors to apply their trade, they had to be in large urban settings where there was a sufficient clientele of people who could pay for their services, and the sufficient aggregate of folks that could supply hospitals and hospital facilities so that all of the doctors in rural east Texas were white.

JRW: You grew up in Conroe? Did you stay in Conroe?

GL: No. Cold Springs, San Jacinto County. My mother was a schoolteacher and she remarried, got a job in Marshall, Texas. And so, I went to junior high and high school in Marshall, Texas. I graduated from Pemberton High School in 1965.

JRW: Pemberton was an all African American school?

GL: Yes. As the record will reflect, segregation in the school was outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1954. In 1956 and again in 1957, the courts said with all delivered speed, the schools had to be desegregated but the reality is in east Texas, those schools

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were not desegregated while I was there. And so, by 1965, 11 years after the Supreme Court made its ruling, the Marshall public schools were still very much segregated.

JRW: When did you graduate from high school?

GL: 1965.

JRW: I assume that you lived in an isolated African American community and by isolated, I mean that the African American community in Marshall was self-contained.

GL: Yes, it was very much self-contained.

JRW: Did you have a sense of the apartheid that you were living in or did you have a sense of security in that isolation?

GL: I mean, I think you can have both. I think not necessarily at all times in contradiction. I think one of the discussions that I like to have with people now is a discussion about not becoming revisionists on the nature of racial segregation in the South. As with any situation, when you get 20, 30 years removed from it, there is a level of glamour that we attach to the past and that is with music, with songs, with the good old days, whatever they were. And a lot of that, as we approach an American society that is challenged at every level, a lot of people have discussed some of the benefits of racial segregation - African Americans have discussed it - absent the full context of what society was going on. It is true that there were some "self-contained" African American communities but by and large, you've got to consider the location. It was possible to have fully self-contained African American communities in larger urban areas.

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JRW: Right, such as Houston.

GL: Such as Houston, but you leave Houston where the overwhelming majority of African Americans live, unlike now where most African Americans live in urban areas. When I grew up in the 1960s, the bulk of the American population was still rural and certainly in Texas, the overwhelming majority of Texans lived in rural and small towns. And for African Americans, that was even more true. So that we didn't have the benefit of fully self-contained communities. The larger the city, the more likely you could find a store or two stores but not department stores or drug stores. The larger the city, like a Marshall, Texas – you may have one funeral director; you would have a proliferation of churches.

JRW: Who was the funeral director?

GL: Rambo. But the notion that we had everything we needed in those communities was just revisionist, it is incorrect and quite frankly, it is offensive, it is asinine. There was not a single place of public accommodation that we had that we felt was a nice enough place to have an event. I never stepped into a hotel in east Texas until I was damned near 30 years old. So, the notion that as I talk to a lot of my friends who are Anglo or white and we kind of reminisce about growing up in east Texas. They may have been from Marshall or Longview or Tyler, you know – casual conversations where people would say, “Oh, you know, I remember Marshall. We played you guys in football.” And I have to remind them, “No, you didn't play us in football.” We played in a segregated district. Or people would come and say, “Yes, I remember I went to the

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prom over at Marshall Motel. Were you there?" And I have to remind them, "No, I was not there. It was not my prom and I was not allowed in a Marshall hotel to do anything except clean floors or wash dishes." Not to get too far off this track but I think it is important to establish that there was a level of security that did come as a result of segregation because of necessity because African American parents went to great extents in the African American community to protect the young coming up – almost in an extended kind of family way. People would applaud the successes, the talent, the skills, people would encourage you. In that kind of community, nurturing was very, very important in development. I can remember countless people who would give me more than a pat on the back but give me the encouragement that you can go and do what you want to do.

JRW: Is there anyone in particular that comes to mind as you think back to those people who . . .

GL: Quite honestly, J.R., it is too numerous to count. I mean, at every level. At my school - all of my schools, from elementary school on up. At the church, it was constantly going on. Neighbors in the community. I mean, it was there. The other thing that was pretty pervasive in the African American community was a learned sense of danger by the adults. To say it differently, our parents had learned that segregation had a brutal side and it was skillfully passed down to my generation there were certain things you do and you don't do. For example, you just don't need to be walking in a white neighborhood at night. It might not be the quickest route to get home, it is just that is not

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what we do. We don't do that.

JRW: Common sense, fundamental . . .

GL: Right. And so, you just didn't do it. I mean, if there was a route to go from one Black neighborhood to another Black neighborhood that went around a predominantly white neighborhood. Now, the flip side . . . the reason I said earlier to your question that these are not necessarily a contradiction is because while there was a sense of protection and self containment to some extent, there was also in that same community of Marshall, Texas, an acute awareness of racial segregation.

JRW: And the isolation.

GL: And the isolation.

JRW: I guess, to call it, white supremacy.

GL: I grew up in an area where there was still an expectation that when an African American walked down Main Street in Marshall, Texas, he was not allowed to look a white man in the face and was, by custom, required to move to the side to allow a white man to pass. I mean, I am old enough to have seen that with my own eyes and that level of humiliation is different from the humiliation that some of my urban African American friends suffered when they were not allowed to try on clothes in Foley's. Yes, maybe you could try on clothes in Foley's but I couldn't even look a man in the eye. I mean, it is a base level of degradation.

JRW: Yes, degradation, and that was the word that came to my mind was, in fact, degradation. It is one thing not to be able to be welcome to try on a hat or not welcome

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to come in the front door or welcome in the building another but it is a whole another to be in public in the broad daylight and be forced into, what most of us associate with life in the 19th century, but in the modern era.

GL: Well, having said that, in the rural south, there were people of good will in all communities and it was not uncommon for people to have relationships that transcended race because in the smaller cities, while some neighborhoods were racially segregated, it was not uncommon for a white family to live literally across the street, across the track . .

JRW: Across the way.

GL: Across the pasture, and that was a level of exchange in action that there was a common understanding that everybody had their place in society where human relationships transcended that. Knowing people, even though you didn't go to school with them, you would know their children because you played together from time to time. In smaller rural areas of the south, that was even more prevalent because out of economic necessity, people worked together, children played together, and there was a kind of bond, if you will, that existed.

JRW: I think, as you mentioned earlier, also the fact that unlike the larger urban areas such as Houston where you had large enclaves and you had large communities such as fourth ward, such as Independence Heights, such as wherever, where you had sizeable populations, you had communities in Houston that exceeded the population of African Americans in Marshall or, from my instance, Alton, Illinois where you could count us

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almost on one hand but that, again, out of necessity in the small towns, just the interaction – you couldn't help it. And you couldn't, for what you needed even, even just for your basic necessities, it seemed to probably have necessitated more interaction and all. When did you leave Marshall?

GL: I left in 1965. I graduated on a Friday and I was out of there on a Saturday, and that is a true story.

JRW: Intentionally?

GL: I could not wait to go.

JRW: Where did you go?

GL: I came to Houston. I had spent two summers prior to graduation in Houston working. I knew Houston well, as well as an 18-year-old.

JRW: Where did you work?

GL: My first job in Houston was with Sunshine Laundry on North Main, just on the other side of the bayou. It was a large laundry. I did manual labor there. The heat of the summer. The second year, I worked there partly and I worked in a smaller air-conditioning shop partly. I had a cousin who was here at Texas Southern and the University of Houston had just integrated.

JRW: I guess a couple of years before, 1963.

GL: 1963. And more importantly, for me, and as I was trying to make the decision on where to go to school, University of Houston had started to recruit African American

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athletes: Warren McVey, Elvin Hayes, Don Chaney. I knew of McVey. His exploits as a football player were legendary. And I had heard of the recruitment of two Blacks that played basketball.

JRW: As a matter of fact, that same year, I think that was the first year that they actually began to seriously recruit, in 1965, to actually seriously recruit or openly recruit African Americans.

GL: Yes, 1964 was the year. The first African American athletes at major schools – a guy named John Westbrook at Baylor, Jerry Levias at SMU, Warren McVey at the University of Houston – that little, small move by the U of H kind of sealed, for me, the decision to come to Houston. Houston was an attractive place to come because I knew it and I liked it. I needed to go to a state supported school because I could not afford to pay for a private school and I had to work my way through school so it was going to be a challenge and I figured I had a better opportunity of doing that in Houston.

JRW: Right. Did you have other schools that you would have liked to have gone to, that you had thought about even though you may not have pursued but were there other schools that came to mind?

GL: Yes. I am exceedingly blessed because a number of my folks on my mother's side are educated. My grandfather, who was not an educated man but my grandmother who was educated, had 6 children – my mother's generation, all my uncles and aunts – and all of them went to school. All of them finished Prairie View A&M University or Texas Southern and then they went on and got master's degrees and became

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schoolteachers except for the two younger boys – one finished Prairie View and went into the U.S. Army as an officer and retired as a colonel after several years, very successful. And my other uncle who is now deceased was Dr. Irvin Perry who was the first African American professor at a predominantly white school in the south. He was an engineering professor at the University of Texas. The Perry Castaneda Library in Austin is named for him.

JRW: What is your uncle's name who was in the military?

GL: Mervin Perry.

JRW: Mervin Perry? O.K., because I have another colleague who, in fact, is studying African American officers in the military. Is he still alive?

GL: No, he is not. He passed away. But both of them were Prairie View graduates of the 1950s. My mother was a Prairie View graduate in the 1940s. So that, for me, I had Wiley College in Marshall was a choice. Wiley was, at that time, a premier, well-respected African American school.

JRW: My stepfather went to Wiley in the 1930s from Illinois.

GL: And, in fact, the migration pattern, interestingly enough, among African Americans has been that many African Americans from Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas went to Illinois but they went their children back south to go to school, and Wiley was a school of choice as was Fisk. So, that Wiley was a choice. Prairie View certainly was a choice. I knew Prairie View well. Because I went to an all Black school, we had an all Black interscholastic league and all interscholastic league activities happened at Prairie

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View. So, I had been on campus numerous times in debate and one-act play and summer events and so, Prairie View was a choice. And my family had all gone there.

JRW: Yes, right, a family tradition.

GL: Yes. And then, I looked at the University of Texas. I thought seriously about the University of Texas. My uncle was now on the faculty there. But it was U of H that really kind of . . . I wanted to set a mark for myself, I wanted to go somewhere and I figured this was the best shot.

JRW: Were you an athlete? Is that part of it? Or was it because of what they were doing with athletes and opened the door?

GL: I was a sports fan. I mean, you can't have many aspects of your life without sports. I was a B team basketball player, at best. Let me correct that – a second team B team basketball player.

JRW: When you came here in 1965, what part of town did you settle in to go to U of H?

GL: I had worked for 2 summers and lived in Kashmere Gardens which, people who are not familiar with Houston would call it either the north side incorrectly or will call it part of Fifth Ward incorrectly. But it is Kashmere Gardens and it is to the north of traditional Fifth Ward. I stayed with a family friend. That is an interesting side.

JRW: Who was that?

GL: Mr. and Mrs. Branch. Mr. Branch worked on the Ship Channel in the all Black ILA and Mrs. Branch was a beautician who had a shop on Lyons Avenue. I stayed with

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them because a generation before, some of my family members in east Texas had taken care of some of her family and it was just kind of a you-pass-it-down, everybody-knows-each-other kind of thing. So, I stayed with Ms. Branch until I came to U of H. Then, I moved to the dormitory, stayed at the dormitory for 2 years, and then my last 2 years, I was kind of out in the city in various places.

JRW: You stayed in the dorm then for your sophomore and your junior year?

GL: Freshman and sophomore years.

JRW: Freshman and sophomore years. Were there any other African Americans in the U of H dorms when you were there?

GL: Yes. 1965 was the first year of a significant attendance of African Americans at the University of Houston. Integrated in 1963, there were a handful of students, very small, in 1963. A handful in 1964. But by 1965, there was a presence, if you will, of students on campus. And so, dormitory living . . . at our dormitory, it was a 5 room suite. So, 5 of us, 3 across the hall.

JRW: Who was in your suite that you recollect?

GL: Well, Omawale [Luthuli-Allen] was across the way. A guy named Howard Love (?) was across the way. Albert Johnson who is from Galveston was there. A guy named Clay Davis. If you give me a while, I'll think about it.

JRW: Was Deloyd [Parker] there yet?

GL: Deloyd came later on. Deloyd was at the campus but we didn't stay together the

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first semester.

JRW: What was life like in that dorm for you young African American men? What was life like for you? And my question is one of your being African Americans in a predominantly white university in the mid 1960s living in the dorm on campus.

GL: You've got to look at things in context and you've got to see the big picture. In the main, it was fun because it was almost impossible to go to school, every freshman or sophomore, and not have fun. In the main, it was fun, and to be around some good brothers and everybody is cracking jokes.

JRW: And to be away from home.

GL: Away from home, and you are coming into your own, you know, and the women are fine and the music is good, you know, and you are testing your manhood and you are drinking alcohol for the first time and you are driving a car. It is good! That is the overwhelming context. Going past that, however, life at the institution was not perfect. As a matter of fact, it was flawed with a lot of problems. The central contradiction that African Americans faced at University of Houston in 1965 and 1966 and 1967 was that the University had not readied itself to be integrated. The University was legally integrated but it had not taken any steps, in my mind. If they did, it hadn't taken any successful steps to make it possible for them to be a smooth transition. And this was not uncommon at the University of Houston. Segregation was defeated legally but integration was met with a lot of resistance. Some resistance was active and open and hostile. Most resistance was passive, neglectful and was kind of ignoring that you even

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existed. And that was the prevailing thing at the University of Houston.

JRW: Were you conscious of that, being invisible men?

GL: Oh, yes. It was just like, you know, you come from a high school and you have a bunch of overachievers, bright kids, who come from situations where they have been top dog in their senior class and on the debate team and the honor society and glee club and football – in all of these things that kind of make you feel that you are a hot shot. And you come to the University and there is no place to fit – you don't feel welcome anywhere.

JRW: Did you attempt to be involved in any student activity early on?

GL: I think all of us students at various stages, the answer is yes. We met with varying degrees of success. For example, there was almost an understood thing that . . . the first party that I went to at the University of Houston, it was part of orientation and I got to the school late because I had to work and they had had some kind of orientation but, you know, I was working trying to make tuition, so I got there and went to the dance. And it was like I was the most invisible SOB there. I mean, it was like I was against the wall. I didn't know anybody. And you would have felt uncomfortable because you didn't know anybody, so you've got to get past that except nobody spoke to you. That is just what was the burden. Nobody spoke to you. And there were a couple of other African Americans there and so you just kind of had to hang out with them. We were like, you know, we are here for . . . we are interlopers at somebody else's event. That was the first awakening and I don't think I got that memory out of my mind for a long

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time. But your question was did we attempt to involve ourselves and the answer is yes.

Various activities. Some of us were successful. Some were not successful.

JRW: Was there any particular that you attempted to involve yourself with?

GL: Yes, I remember that early on, I wanted to be involved with the debate team because that is what I had done in high school and I figured that would . . . I don't remember the particulars of what happen but I do remember that I was significantly discouraged. I remember being told, "Well, most of our debaters come as a recommendation from speech class." And so, I kind of asked the question, "Well, does that mean if you have a good debater and they are not recommended, they can't make the team?" I don't remember what the answer was but I was probably a little smart ass – I suggested to debate them on the issue. If you've got a first round draft choice and you are not recommended by the coach, you are still not going to be drafted? That doesn't make any sense. And, you know, the next year actually, I did take speech class. There was kind of a university-wide speaking contest for a public speaker and Omawale and others encouraged me to go and participate and I participated and won the event. I thought about often going back to that debate teacher and I said, no. But the early days at U of H . . .

JRW: See, I did. I went back to my high school thespian teacher. I was in the place and stuff and I was one place shy of . . . I was in maskers but I was one place shy of thespians. You had to turn in all the stuff for the yearbook by that Thursday. The play I was then in didn't open until Friday and he said, "Well, you may not show up, so we

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can't put you in." So, of course, after I did my first film, you know, I ran into him and I said, "Say, yeah, you didn't" . . . I couldn't help myself. I had to remind him.

GL: Well, the larger picture is the University . . . this is not unique to the University of Houston – let the record reflect that. This is the classic way that American integrated.

JRW: Integrated or desegregated?

GL: Either term you want. In my mind, we are still neither segregated nor integrated. In the 1960s and 1970s, they used that play on words like there was some big difference. You know, given 40 years of history with this thing, the reality is American is still very much racially segregated. Not de jour segregation but certainly de facto segregation exists. The University of Houston was not ready and the result was that you had a large number of African Americans who came in who now felt not a part of the context. And I think the first year or so there, that was the natural feeling that, you know, we are not doing everything that we need to do to become a part of the institution. And that is 1965-1966. By 1966-1967, the civil rights movement has given birth to this embryo called the Black Movement that has aspects of Black culturism, Black Nationalism, Black power politically, etc., etc. And all of a sudden, we stopped asking ourselves what is it that we need to do for the university, why isn't the university doing anything to help us?

JRW: We were talking about ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country and that consciousness.

GL: So, as a result of the rise of the Black movement in America in the 1960s that students were leading across the country, a number of us at the University of Houston felt

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that the primary responsibility for changing the situation, really being in line with us, that that was something systemic and institutional about the way racism operated in the University of Houston. So, we started to identify what we thought were institutional manifestations of racism at the University of Houston.

JRW: Who is “we?”

GL We, being students just collectively. Black students. That does not mean, and I don’t want to diminish the fact that there were individual acts of race and racism that happened to a lot of us. You know, you get to the case . . . most of your white students would never call you “nigger” in public but it happened on occasion. You would hear it under people’s breath. You’d get the indignation of students not . . . you go to the cafeteria line and people kind of cut in front of you. It was just that kind of deal. And a lot of Black students complained that they didn’t get fair grading in classes that were rated subjectively. Now, you know, every student in a subjective class believes that they did better than they did.

JRW: Yes, mine do!

GL: So, all this is not about race and we are probably just as guilty as anybody else was. On the other hand, I do remember a number of my teachers, particularly in English class, feeling absolutely shocked that we could use the English language in an appropriate way. And what many of them didn’t realize, I guess, was that segregation had denied the best and the brightest among African Americans fields of industry and commerce and politics, and many of them ended up in the classroom. And so, you had very good

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teachers who, in turn, taught students and we knew more than we were expected to know.

So, there were some individual acts of racism but the problem at the University of Houston in the 1960s was the institution itself was not ready. So, there was institutional racism.

JRW: Did you have to, in fact, you and other students . . . were there times when you did have to, in fact, restrain yourself from responding to overt racism or was it just like of like, they're stupid so we just keep on pushing?

GL: I really don't remember, quite honestly. I remember some isolated incidents and invariably, they would happen in a context where there was not a group of African Americans – there was just one guy, you know, in one situation and so it just kind of went like that.

JRW: O.K.

GL: But that is kind of the history of the University of Houston. That is what gave birth to Black activism at the University of Houston. It was inevitably going to happen because it was the nature of the times. My generation was politically active and we had the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the war in Vietnam as kind of the genesis that really raised some very fundamental questions about where this country was. And, you know, the war in Vietnam, unlike the war in Iraq – young people could not simply say, well that is a bad thing, that is a good thing in the abstract because all of us were being drafted. It was just a matter of time before your political view on the issue was going to be put to the test because you were going to be in Vietnam yourself. And

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so, it led to a much higher level of activism and anti-war sentiment.

JRW: On the campus of U of H at that time, was there anti-war activity?

GL: Yes. There was a Students for a Democratic Society organization, SDS, that was the most visible anti-war faction but there were a whole lot of other people. I don't want to give them the balance and say they led the charge. Democrats were against it, the war in Vietnam. There were a number of other . . . the African American students, Hispanic students who were politically active. On the other hand, there were white people who supported the war, and the truth be known, the University of Houston that I went to in the late 1960s, is still very similar to the University of Houston that exists now in that a large number of commuter students who had their views but you never knew what their views were, they didn't have an opportunity to really become part of the fabric of the student life because they were in and out of school.

JRW: Yes, and a working student population also, you know, where everybody had adult responsibilities and time constraints. So, out of this consciousness . . . I guess one thing we haven't talked about and we will come back to this consciousness . . . we have African American young women coming on campus at the same time?

GL: Yes.

JRW: Around 1965, 1966, 1967?

GL: Yes.

JRW: Do you remember some of them who were . . .

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GL: Well, Lynn Eusan, for example. There were a host of the young folks. Loretta Devine who is the actress now was at the University of Houston. She was one of those trailblazers in drama. She made it in drama despite discouragements that I am sure she got at the university. But the fact that you have a state-supported school, the fact that state-supported education is typically more accessible to classes of people, both middle income, lower income, upper income than private schools, University of Houston is very fortunate that some of the best and the brightest from all communities have been able to walk the halls of U of H and get an education there. And certainly, that was true with Black students who came here. You had some good people who came and as you move around and talk to folks, you will see that that was a special group of young, eager, we-are-going-to-make-it-in-spite-of-everything-else-kind of attitude students who were at the University.

JRW: What was your major when you came there?

GL: Political science.

JRW: And you did, in fact, graduate with a degree?

GL: A B.A. degree in political science with a minor in history.

JRW: Oh, is that right?

GL: Yes.

JRW: Where did you go to grad school?

GL: I did not. I left the University of Houston and I left with a B.A. degree in political

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science and history. I enrolled in Texas Southern Law School for a semester and went to law school for a semester, but my law school studies were interrupted by the trial on the inciting a riot charge. So, I dropped out of law school at the beginning of the second semester because that is when the trial was going on and I didn't go back to school until I was 30 years old. And after having worked in various other jobs . . .

JRW: Such as?

GL: Well, I was a civil rights activist after I left the University of Houston or the Black Movement, whatever the term is. The appropriate term on this day of 2006 is community activist. So, I was a "community activist." But I headed up a couple of organizations, local and national. Then, I ran a couple of nonprofit organizations. Then, you know, the reality of being married and having a family and having to work. I worked in a steel mill, Onco Steel.

JRW: For real, real work.

GL: And then, I left there and I went to work at an oil refinery, Shell Oil, and I worked in the oil refinery, Shell Oil.

JRW: Are any of the community organizations that you worked in still in existence today?

GL: Let me tell you who they were. I worked first with an organization that we created called the Afro-Americans for Black Liberation. We raised money to support community activities here and also raised money to support what was then the Freedom Fighters of Southern African because you are talking about a time when Mozambique,

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Angola, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and South Africa were still, either under colonialism or under systems of apartheid. Then, after that, I worked for a community organization called ACORN, not to be confused with the ACORN community group that exists now, on the northwest side of town. I worked with Hope Development which was an historic local organization that was created by Reverend Earl Allen and some others and worked out of Fifth Ward for a number of years. And all of those are no longer in existence. I was one of the group that founded the SHAPE [Self Help for African People through Education] Community Center and it is still in existence but I never worked for SHAPE. So, then I went to law school at South Texas at night.

JRW: Had there been very many African Americans who had gone to South Texas School of Law at that time?

GL: No. I had this knack of always being one of the first ones to get in. And South Texas had not . . . I think there had been two African Americans that made it before me and they were always still at school. There was one that dropped out. So, I think it was the second or third year that African Americans had started to kind of go there.

JRW: Were you the first to graduate?

GL: Not the first but I think I was in the second graduating year. In my class, there were very few . . . I think there were three of us who started out and only two of us finished.

Tape #2

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JRW: But you were not the first African Americans to graduate from South Texas?

GL: I think there was somebody before and I don't remember exactly who. There may have even been three in my graduating class because there were three of us who came in at the same time and two of us who graduated but then there was another African American woman who graduated with us because I went to school at night and I went during the summers and I didn't have the advantage of going three straight years. It took me almost four years to get a law degree, 3-1/2 years using every summer.

JRW: If we go back into the mid 1960s and all and this consciousness at the University that you, as students, would have to do something to effect this institutional racism and all, were you involved in the African American Studies program and the emergence of the African American Studies program there?

GL: Yes, I was involved.

JRW: You were involved? Can you tell us about that program which continues today, in fact.

GL: I think there were a few of us through . . . I was a history student. History was my minor. I almost went to make history my major. I really wanted a double major. I was fascinated by history. What was really striking to me was to come to history classes and see how one-sided and how typically traditional the lectures and the writings were. And when you say "typically traditional," in a history context, as you well know, during my generation, what you were saying was that most of the more prominent historians had been southern writers who wrote American history from a more sympathetic view than a

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lot of us would have about the second half of American society. And a lot of that was at the University. So, I was just indignant about it. I was one of the early advocates and we have got to do something about this. I thought we needed an African American history class. I mean, that was the thing because I read Lerone Bennett's *Before the Mayflower* backwards and forwards three or four times before I was about 15 years old. I think that was . . . we need an African American history class. That just grew into an African American studies program.

JRW: What were some of those early moves that you made towards that end? What happened? Who is this "we?"

GL: We organized a number of students on campus, first under a group called the Committee on Better Race Relations and that was 1967. That group was very active in pushing a lot of issues. It was a Black, white, brown, rainbow group that was led by African American students, Omawale and I basically organized it and Lynn Eusan, the three of us. We were kind of generally known as the three instigators. That was 1967-1968 and basically, we did a number of things on campus to try to have a presence. It led to aligning ourselves with other groups to get Lynn Eusan elected as the first African American homecoming queen, at the University. Influencing student body elections so that the candidates of our choice got elected, the swing vote helped us do a lot of things. But after a while, I think we grew past some of the self-centered issues related to students and took a view of our situation on a larger, national/international context.

JRW: I interrupt you because what that makes me think of, in fact, is African American

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abolitionism and how initially prior to the 1830s or early 1800s, that the point of liberation was more personal and individual and get my family to the north, and then we see this transition, this awareness that it is not just about me and my family; that, in fact, it is about our people in the broad sense, and eradicating enslavement. Not just me getting liberated but eradicating enslavement in a broader sense.

GL: So, we started to get involved in a host of the issues of the day, and time does not really permit to go through all of the things that we did in the first year but suffice it to say, we were an active political force on campus. And then, by 1968, I think it became very clear to us that we needed to make some demands of the University. We had organized something that was called the Afro-Americans for Black Liberation. It was called AABL. It was an exclusively Black organization that basically now started to make demands. We ultimately issued the 10 demands at the University of Houston. Have you seen a copy of those?

JRW: No, I haven't.

GL: Yes, well, it was in the spring of 1969, maybe it was February 1969 because we moved in the spring, February 1969 - beginning of second semester we issued 10 demands on the University.

JRW: Did they publish them in the Cougar [newspaper]?

GL: I am looking around to see if I can find a copy. Somebody should have one. But that was the political movement at the University that spring semester. That movement led to demonstrations, protests on a very regular basis at the campus.

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JRW: Almost daily?

GL: Certainly weekly. I don't want to rewrite history.

JRW: Yes, I understand.

GL: I hope its daily but... we had to study sometimes! But that is what we did: we lived and breathed trying to get out of the University with some decent grades. We were passionate about this, really passionate, to a point that if that was our identity, who we were wrapped into, we were going to change it at this university, and we took great comfort in the fact that Black students were doing it all across the country. And because they were doing it all across the country, I mean, we were going to make this happen. One of the demands, the first demand was going after the American studies program. The second demand was for hiring more Black faculty, staff. The third demand was for more scholarship money and grant money for minority students. And it was just kind of like that, going down at that time. We had wanted to fire the baseball coach because we thought he was racist. But the 10th demand was for a decent wage for the staff, the domestic staff at the University because, you know, you live in a dormitory and, you know, those people who clean up, I mean, that is your mother and grandmother. One generation removed. And you kind of learn to like those people. You talk with them. And they would talk to you about the opportunities you had that they didn't have. And you began to learn how difficult it was for them to make it on the little money that they were making. So, we issued those 10 demands. A lot of demonstrations, and ended up, obviously, the result of all of that was . . . I am fast forwarding to kind of get you in the

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context . . . ended up with, there was an incident at the University in Cougar Den that was preceded by a speech that I gave. And so, that was the basis for the indictment for inciting the riot. The speech was . . . our defense at trial was defense was timely moved. The speech was probably 2, 3 hours before the actual incident. It was not one of those things where somebody said, "Pick up some sticks and blocks and go tear up the Cougar den." It was a typical political speech about how unjust the University is and that kind of thing. And I believe to this day that, you know, even some of the students from SDS who were at the rally who started the violence in school, the African American students interestingly enough, as a matter of strategy, we had always taken the position under my leadership that we would not take any action at the University that would invite the Houston Police Department on campus because I believe the Houston Police Department at the time was a racist organization and they would literally kill you, and that we didn't have the luxury of Columbia University where the students took over an administration building and held it. That was not going to happen in Houston. We knew it and so we couldn't be foolish from a tactical standpoint, having tactics. So, it would be very surprising to me if somebody suggested 40 years later that Black students started the little bit of vandalism that happened at Cougar Bookstore. Quite the contrary. I think it was others who may have been at the rally, may have been saying they were supporters but it was not our strategy. But nevertheless, there was vandalism, glass broken, shelves drained open. Minimal damage. Excitement on a college campus.

JRW: Yes, especially in 1969.

GL: Yes, I mean, but the powers that be reacted in a way to teach everybody a lesson.

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And so, initially, I think there were 11 or 13 students who were charged either with rioting or inciting to riot and ultimately, the focus grew on Omawale and I for inciting to riot. We were charged with inciting a riot and while that was going on, we continued to negotiate with the University and basically told them that, you know, we were not going to cease and desist; that it was going to get worse instead of getting better.

JRW: Who were you negotiating with?

GL: President Hoffman directly. The end result was the University invited us to Galveston to what is now the Galvez Hotel for a weekend to negotiate and they had a couple of facilitators there. We basically had them hammer out an arrangement for the initiation of the African American studies program and the end to the protest on campus. We were able to declare victory because we got commitment to get more Black faculty and staff, more aid in scholarship, and not only got an African American studies program but they invited the Hispanic students down also and that was the beginning of the Mexican American Studies program.

JRW: Was Tacho involved in that initial . . .

GL: Tacho was not involved early in the demands on the University kind of thing but it was only natural that if you are talking about African American studies, you know, you need to be talking about something broad and other ethnic groups. And so, the Hispanic students started to make noise after we did but at the same time. And so, he was invited to this event/retreat/negotiation session down in Galveston.

JRW: Tacho was?

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GL: Yes. And that ended up in the Mexican American Studies program.

JRW: Who was the first director?

GL: The first director was really just an interim director. The history professor at the University of Houston – Robert Haynes. He taught the first African American Studies program.

JRW: Did you take the course?

GL: I aced it!

JRW: Was that thrilling, I mean, to walk in that classroom for the first time and to be . . .

GL: Yes, it was nice. So, that is really the origin of the University of Houston's African American Studies program. Since that time, that program has come under attack from year to year. There has always been this deal, should it be a program, should it be a department, should it be a part of something else and over the years, it has had strong directors, it has had weak directors, the focus has kind of changed from time to time but I am proud that a number of students have benefited so much over the years as a result of it.

JRW: I am holding my hand up high right now. Indeed. I am one of those students who directly benefited. I benefited financially, I benefited from it academically. I benefited from it professional. I benefited from it in every way possible.

GL: If you talk to some students, what makes me feel real good because this was my situation, when I took the African American history class, it is not easy to go 4 years at an

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institution and study a number of things, some of which you have no interest in at all.

You have to have a self-discipline to say, you know, I am going to suck it up and get real.

African American studies and, in my case, you have to remember, history class, was kind of a retreat, a place that I could go and kind of get recharged, you know, because I am learning something I am really excited about and I see it with students in drama. They take a lot of other classes they have to but they just immerse themselves in drama. And if that helps people get through school and give them perspective, it is a major contributor.

JRW: Also within African American studies, there was, I think it is called Institute on Public Policy or a Public Policy program that emerged out of that also, looking at public policy with Russell . . . what is Russell's last name. It is right there on Cullen and MacGregor.

GL: I know Dr. Murray in the Political Science department has a Center for Public Policy.

JRW: Right, this was within African American studies and maybe that was after you came.

GL: I am not familiar with it.

JRW: O.K.

GL: So, that is kind of my involvement with the African American Studies program. My experience with the University of Houston was it was a love/hate relationship. I since have become a big supporter of the University. I have seen a lot of changes. I am still a fairly vocal critic. The relationship is much more love than hate now but I can be a

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voice on occasion of speaking my mind and saying what things are not on the up-and-up.

But the University has made great strides and I think it is really moved to a point where it would be difficult to retreat and that is good because for a long time, you were just fighting to survive. I think there are now a lot of people in place and there is a lot of tradition and a lot of expectations that would make it difficult for the University to make a quick and abrupt turn. It may make a slow turn but not a quick and abrupt turn. So, that is U of H.

JRW: I know we are running short on time here. How much time do we have left?

GL: We have about 20 minutes.

JRW: You mentioned SHAPE Community Center which now here 30 years later is still in existence. What was the impetus for you and Deloyd [Parker] and others to . . . what was the impetus for what you did that has resulted in what we now call SHAPE Community Center?

GL: There was a consciousness among the students, Black students that the University of Houston set in the heart of a very impoverished African American neighborhood and there was a contradiction between it being a center of education surrounded by kids who so desperately needed our help. So, we really started an effort to get the University to fund the tutorial programs in the neighborhood. And we met some resistance and after a while, it was like, you know, we just kept hollering at the University, 'you need to do this, you need to do that.' I think we got some students – not just Black students, we got some white students who came volunteering. You know, we would hold tutoring classes

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but after a point, some of us Black students said, you know, we need to go out and do this ourselves. So, Lynn Eusan, I remember, she was really instrumental in starting to tutor kids from the Third Ward area, from the bottoms of neighborhoods, very impoverished. That led to..... well, we need a location to do this. Then, that led to..... well, we need to institutionalize a summer program. Then, that led to..... well, we need a community of organization. And so, that was SHAPE Center.

JRW: So, it started out then academic tutoring . . .

GL: That was the genesis that gave rise to it. Now, you know, depending on when you want to document the actual start of SHAPE Center . . . but the whole idea was you really needed to have the University play a role in the betterment of the neighborhood . . .

JRW: The academic institution have an academic involvement in the community. Did you also do breakfast and stuff like that with kids? Well, I guess what you said was we had the academic after school programming and then on into summer programming and then on into actually institutionalizing and all of that. Did you feed the kids as they were coming for programs and tutoring and stuff?

GL: Early on, we didn't because we didn't have the resources but we kind of grew into that. When we got to the summer programs, we raised money to have those and Deloyd just kind of took over that and it has been his life. He has done a great, great job.

JRW: Yes, a mission indeed. So, in fact, you do come out of South Texas College of Law. You actually do have a law degree. You actually passed the Bar. Did you pass it the first go round?

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GL: Yes.

JRW: What was your first job as an attorney?

GL: Well, you know, I guess the first thing I realized . . . I had to work when I was at school, so I worked in order to financially put my self through law school. So, I did not have the benefit of clerking with other law firms. I didn't know how to practice law. Law school doesn't teach you how to practice law. It teaches you the theory of law. It gives you some vague notion of how to think as a lawyer. The first thing I did was apply to the law department of Shell since I worked for Shell and since Shell Oil had been my employer.

JRW: What year was this?

GL: 1981. I went to law school from 1977 to 1981. Shell had no interest in me so I started out first with a law firm called Nelson and Mullett. It is a 6 or 8 person law firm that had prided themselves in being a multiracial firm, having whites, Hispanics and Blacks and, you know, basically liberal guys who kind of wanted to make a difference. Some of them came out of the old VISTA program.

JRW: Volunteers in Service to America?

GL: Yes, and my friend, L. Franco Lee, county commissioner, knew Eric Nelson and said, "Go ahead and talk to those guys." And so, really got started with them. I was an associate there. I was, at the time, 35 years old. I started practicing law. I had to learn law from the bottom up.

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JRW: How to practice law?

GL: How to practice law, yes. And so, the first cases that I took were basically anything that walked in the door, and the cases at the firm that the other lawyer didn't want. One of the advantages that I had though was that I was 35 years old and not 22 or 24. And so, I had enough life experiences to be able to quickly come to grips with kind of an innate sense of what is real and what is not and I could kind of cut through the chase real quick. The other thing I think that served me well personally was I was very unintimidated. I was not intimidated at all about what could happen in the courtroom. After you have been a defendant in the courtroom for an inciting a riot charge, you know, you've been locked up on numerous occasions for civil rights protest, going into a courtroom as a lawyer is an honor. It is a joy. And you have this recognition at the end of the day – you go home and get in your car – you are not going to jail.

JRW: Did you sometimes wonder that during the process of this incitement of riot case in the 1960s, were you seriously concerned that you might be going away?

GL: Yes, I prepared myself that I could be convicted.

JRW: What was the outcome of that trial?

GL: It was a hung jury. The Blacks on the jury voted for acquitting, the whites on the jury voted for conviction. But we put so many people in the courtroom every day that it became politically difficult for the DA's office to retry the case.

JRW: Who else was tried with you?

GL: Omawale. Just the two of us. This was January 1970. That was the hot thing

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in Houston that year, the trial of Locke and Allen. We were acquitted and kind of went on with our lives. But my point being that having been involved in as many things as I was involved in, really had a perverse way of preparing me to practice law because that was no judge that could say or do anything that really was going to intimidate me, and I had a keen appreciation for the pain that some of my clients had to go through trying to deal with either the criminal justice system or the civil justice system and I think it made me a better person and a better lawyer.

JRW: It is interesting, as you are saying that, I think about myself and teaching at the university and the person I am, given that I did not go to elementary, junior high, high school, college and then start teaching college but that I have lived life outside of academia and what I am able to bring, the perspective that I am able to bring to students and experiences that I am able to bring with me in terms of how I deal with students. I know, for me, it comes down to perhaps what other people might blow off . . . you know, I am going to pull them to the side and have a conversation with because I can smell it and I can see it and I can see me, you know, in 1969 telling my teacher, "Oh, I don't need this class." Got an "A" going . . . I walk out of the class . . . I drop the class. So yes, bringing life experiences.

GL: And then from Nelson and Millett, I worked there for about one year practicing law and then Congressman [Mickey] Leland convinced me to abandon my law practice to come to Washington, D.C. to run his congressional office. And so, I did. I worked for 1-1/2 years, almost 2 years, with Mickey running his congressional office in Washington and I ran the one here in Houston, too. I was his administrative assistant. Capitol Hill

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calls it AA which is top guy in the office who basically would make all the decisions for the congressman except the policy decisions that he would make. Mickey was a friend. Mickey and I have been involved in a lot of stuff in the 1960s together. I did not like Capitol Hill. I did not like electoral politics at that level. I loved helping to get people elected and having the community have a say but it was not my deal and I was not master of my own fate. I needed my own shop to run. And so . . . second marriage . . . when my wife got pregnant, Aubrey was pregnant with my first son, I told her we'd come back to Texas. So, we came back to Houston and rejoined the same firm – Nelson and Millett – and after a while, that firm split and I started a firm called Nelson and Locke. We did basically civil work in the law firm that represented trade unions, teamsters, longshoremen, service workers. I did a lot of the personal injury, a lot of the civil problems that unions would have. I did some civil rights litigation. And I continued to do a little bit of criminal work. I never held myself out as a criminal lawyer. I have tried criminal cases. I have done enough to know my way around the criminal courthouse.

Some time around that time, because of my own background and because of my political connections, I began to represent elected officials in personal matters or in matters related to the performance to their office as a lawyer – not as just a political advisor. But I have this sense of politics given my involvement and I became keenly aware of the political manifestations of whatever you do. And that kind of led me into, at least being recognized by Mayor Lanier and Lanier then offered me the position of City Attorney in 1994, and I accepted and served from 1995, 1996, 1997, and I served a few months with Mayor Brown in 1998. And then, came back into private practice with a law

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firm that ultimately became this firm – Andrews Kurth.

JRW: Why did you choose this firm?

GL: Well, I basically wanted to have a practice representing governments because I had been City Attorney for . . . I have a unique area of law that very few people are exposed to and I now have not just exposure but skill.

JRW: From all ends.

GL: Yes. So, it was just a natural. And this law firm was then Mayor, Day, Caldwell and Keeton, had government clients. And so, I could literally start representing governments immediately. And presently, I am very fortunate – I represent and hold as my clients – I am general counsel to the Harris County Houston Sports Authority, special counsel to the Board of Houston, special counsel to Metro. I do work for the city of Pasadena, the city of Houston, the county of Galveston, Dallas County. I have done work for the city of San Antonio. I represent governments. I have been very fortunate to be able to have good clients and handle some of the major public policy issues of the day. And so, it is a long way from trying to create a Black studies program to what is the city's position on affirmative action to how do you build light rail to how do you build a Bay Port terminal to create jobs for Houston.

JRW: Are you enjoying it?

GL: Yes. In many respects, I do. In other respects, I miss the one-on-one relationship that you have with your clients. That was always the most rewarding thing about the practice of law, to have somebody come into your office on one day and give you a

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problem and then two years later, they leave and you say, "O.K., we have taken care of it."

JRW: Yes. Well, I think you have given us some marvelous insights. I want to thank you.

GL: I appreciate it, man. I hope this has been helpful for you.

JRW: It has and I think that part of what comes out of an interview like this are thoughts and questions for others, you know, for me to sit down and talk with Omawale and to talk with Deloyd and talk with other folks . . . specifics that come out to be able to bounce off of them and to provoke their thoughts and ideas and stir up additional conversations, and what I am hoping to do with this, in fact, at one point is to do an article on what we talked about, on the African American students in the 1960s at U of H and the formation of African American studies, and the experiences that those of you who were at U of H in the 1960s, what those experiences were about. I think in about one year, the issue of the *Houston Review*, the journal, the *Houston Review*, is going to cover law. And so, I think that that is what I am really working towards in terms of what I can do with these interviews beyond just the archiving of them into the archives, but to generate a general article and to share some of these insights with the broader community.

GL: Well, I do think that Omawale would be a source of a lot of information.

JRW: I'll take 6 tapes!

GL: Yes. Deloyd also. You know, what is always a challenge . . . I started my conversation with you taking a shot at revisionist history. What is always a challenge is

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to be able to accurately reflect something from a prior time without the biases of present day existence.

JRW: Exactly.

GL: If one were to read some of the early writings, for example, of any period of American history, some of them have withstood the test of time and are very thought-provoking and challenging. I dare say that most of it is so locked into the time period itself. And when you look at it from these eyes today, you just can't really understand what the heck is going on. And I think that when you are taking a piece of oral history, that is going to be your biggest challenge – to get people to put things in the context, and then for you as the historian, to explain to the present day generation, your present day readers, how that context operates because many people don't have a clue as to the way Jim Crow segregation operated and so it is natural then for a young white kid to come up to me and say, "Oh, you probably went to school with my dad," or "You probably know my mom." I say, "Man, I can't know a white woman. What are you talking about?"

JRW: Or even a young African American kid to come up and say . . . to think that it has always been like this.

GL: That is right.

JRW: You can say one of the great challenges of this is, in fact, to delineate between the recollections of an 18 year old and the recollections of a 16 year old about the experiences of an 18 year old and in interviewing different people about the same general subjects, looking for the common threads, you know, that you can find and trying to

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distill it down. And, again, as you said in the beginning, context plays such an important part in history; you know, that is has to be contextualized and what the times are like, what the energy was like, what was . . . it wasn't just U of H. It was the U.S. society, and Vietnam, and it is the youth movement and it is questioning authority and it is the modern civil rights movement and it is the Black movement and it is just all of these things. And again, making sure that people see that all of that comes into play and seeing that we are talking about law and order, Nixon and Spiro Agnew and all of those guys and white backlash and the Democratic Convention and police power and all of that, and fitting it in so that people do have a context. And it was a great time to be young.

GL: Yes, it was, man. It was.

JRW: I went to school in 1969 and it was just a marvelous time.

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