University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project

Interviewee: Omawale Lithuli Allen

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Abstract:

Omawale Lithuli Allen is a social worker case manager in Houston, Texas who works with human rights cases. He first came to Houston in 1966, to attend the University of Houston. In this interview, Allen notes the impact of the Civil Rights movement and student activism on his life as a student at the university. He discusses the various events and people who shaped his life during the racially polarized environment of the late 1960s, including Dr. Martin Luther King, efforts towards integration, and student activism groups both at the University of Houston and alliances with other groups such as at Texas Southern University. A sense of social unrest and dissent is present through his personal accounts on the TSU riot, but his narrative is focused on the importance of community building efforts within the Third Ward during this era.

EW: All right so we'll start by asking, for me once again, so if you could state your name and who you are.

OLA: Okay, my name is Omawale Lithuli Allen. I am from De Quincy, Louisiana. I am a 1970 graduate of the University of Houston School of Political Science.

EW: So you're originally from Louisiana. What, what was it like there where you were born in Louisiana or did you leave there early?

OLA: Well, I was actually born in Amarillo, Texas, but my daddy deceased around 1950 and my mother relocated in her hometown in North Louisiana. So we were forced to migrate through the death of my daddy. My daddy worked at the munitions plants in Amarillo**.** I actually grew up in South Louisiana in a little town called De Quincy because I went to school there in segregated schools in De Quincy. Although, the schools were segregated we had a very supportive, social environment in our communities and the schools were really fashioned in a way to help us with leadership development. So we got excellent leadership development skills, not a lot of extras in terms of advanced learning, but in terms of basics, we were pretty solid. In other words, [interruption]

EW: So you're originally from where?

OLA: I was born in Amarillo, Texas, stayed in Amarillo, Texas until about 1951, my daddy deceased from a dread disease and my mother relocated in her hometown in north Louisiana, went to school, became a teacher, educated at Grambling College, moved to south Louisiana, to a little town called De Quincy, Louisiana and that's where I actually went to primary and secondary school, graduated in 1966. It was a segregated environment, but it was very supportive

in our neighborhoods and in our schools, and so, we were equipped to certainly be representative with the SAT and the ACT which was needed to get into the University of Houston at the time, and we did well enough to make a passing score to get into the University of Houston and our schools were also very strong in leadership development so far as interscholastic competition, clubs, and organizations were concerned.

EW: So what brought you to Houston? Did you come alone or was it your family coming to Houston?

OLA: Well, fundamentally it was the lure of the big city. I had, had extensive experience with the historically black schools in Louisiana, especially Grambling, and Southern University and I guess, I had frequented those campuses so much for athletic and scholastic opportunities that I wanted something new, and so the lure of the big city is what attracted me to Houston.

EW: So when you came to Houston you started at the University of Houston and got involved in student activism there, but were there, was there any particular moment or series of things that began your consciousness of racism, segregation, and things at the time, what did your…

OLA: Well, there were a number of things and I would particularly point to the fact that growing up in a segregated, racially, polarized, and sometime a racially intense environment there was a certain role that my parents played, my mother, and my grandmother, and my aunt in trying to protect the young black male, at that time, from the capriciousness or the arbitrariness of segregation. And so therefore you, you were always aware that something was wrong even if you could not pinpoint it. You know I remember around 1955 when my parents had all of my first cousins and I to sit in front of the TV and watch the funeral of Emmett Till. I remember the bombing of the church in Birmingham and the killing of the girls in the church at Birmingham. When we would ride from north to south Louisiana, there would be big signs that were

established by the white citizens council, which had a young Dr. Martin Luther King sitting at a desk and they would have Dr. Martin Luther King at Communist training school, and we would always ask the question to our parents, I would, as to whether or not that was true or not and she would tell me and say, "Well, junior that's just propaganda," and so I began to think about what was the rationale or the motivation for picturing Dr. Martin Luther King in such a, a poor light.

So my point is that we, we, we kind of grew up in the environment where one community was under-developed and another community was over-developed. And we wondered why the communities were under-developed. I think it was in 1965 that we got the letters from the Justice Department, the letters from the Justice Department said that we had the option of pursuing freedom of choice, that we did not have to go to the predominately black school, that we could, in fact, what they call integration. Our classmates, we had a meeting, I just happened to be the president of my class and we discussed as to whether or not we were going to go to the predominately white school, or were going to stay at our segregated school and so we decided that since we had all been together since the time that we were potty-trained that we needed to stay together. So none of my classmates… 100 percent of us decided to stay together for our last year, and then all of the boys, we played football together and so we came close to winning the state championship the previous year, so we decided we'd stay together and see if we could win it the next year and we did win the state championship the next year, which formed bonds that knitted us together for the for the remainder of the journey.

EW: So, you mentioned being brought together with your relatives and watching the funeral of Emmett Till, even at a young age.

OLA: Right.

EW: So, not only were you aware of what was going on locally, but you kind of grew up understanding what was going nationally from being exposed to it?

OLA: Oh absolutely. Again, when we would travel from my, the town where I went to school to north Louisiana to where my grandparents lived, you know all the accommodations were segregated, which meant, that you had to go to the back door, you didn't have a place to use the restroom, you would have to stop and go in the woods or the weeds and things like that. So, it was the type of in your face segregation, so that was a real effort to paint aspects of black life as being inferior. So it was really inescapable, but some of the aspects of segregation was so painful that you, you use some mechanisms in your head to try to block them out and try to ,you know, have a fruitful existence, enjoy your friends, your classmates, your families, without being adversely impacted as much as can, as much as possible by segregation.

EW: So, then you came to University of Houston in the late 1960's and you began to get involved as a student there at U of H?

OLA: Well, actually prior to coming to the University of Houston, I had gotten involved in the spontaneous way with what you might call community building and community strengthening act, strengthening activity when I was in Louisiana, and it was kind of, it was probably by osmosis that you saw what was going on in the news media and the rest of the country so I could remember that going out at the after school to chant at the red light, "Two, four, six, eight, we want to integrate! Two, four, six, eight, we want to integrate!" The pools were segregated in north and south Louisiana so we couldn't swim during the summer, and so I remember you know, taking my buddies to the pool, and being denied. Even when I was in high school, when I was in high school I remember the movies were segregated and so we would always be harassed by the, the white kids who didn't want us coming to town, and so we would return the favor and

it would be tit by tat, tit for tat, and so the, the local police would come and get me out of bed, take me to the police station at you know, one or two o' clock in the morning, ask me questions about what took place in terms of retaliatory activity for the harassment. But anyway, I was very fortunate to leave the town without any nicks and bruises, but when I got to the University of Houston I was familiar with the growth of the black power movement. I was familiar with all of the students who had put their academic careers on line, and they had went into the Deep South to organize in the Deep South. I was familiar with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and so when I got to the University of Houston I wanted to start an organization that would improve the life of African American students and also ah, work to eradicate some of the misery in the community. So, I asked questions and I sought out people who would have a, a, consciousness or an awareness in who might want to support such an organization. I was told about a upperclassman by the name of Gene Locke and so I went and found Gene Locke and asked Gene Locke if he would support such an organization, and he said he would and, as a matter of fact, he became the first chairperson of the organization. I met other people like Lynn Eusan and Michelle Bonds Audrey Teller, Veronica Dorian, who later became Nia Teller and a professor at the university. So, I met a real strong cluster of African American students who were in concert with launching an organization that would fight for equality at the university. Two notable people Shara, Gene's ex-wife Shara Locke, and my ex-wife was Mary Bowers, is that all of us kind of jelled together with Lynn Eusan to launch this organization called the Committee on Better Race Relations, and that had to be early 1966, I should say late 1966 going into the fall of 1967.

EW: So were there any particular issues that, that, the committee fought for?

OLA: Well, when we decided to analyze and measure the status, status of African American students at the university we looked at a lot of areas. One of the areas we looked like, we looked at was the question of relevance in terms of the curriculum, whether or not the curriculum spoke to our reality and one of the things that we looked at that was not there was not an African American studies department. There had been some notable advances made at places like San Francisco State and Cornell University. So, we were aware of the absence of an African American studies department. There was a paucity of African American teachers, African American counselors. There was not a recruitment mechanism to bring in African American students from the surrounding schools and communities. We felt that the workers who were doing landscaping, maintenance, and cafeteria work at the University of Houston, that they were underpaid, "under-representative" and they needed a voice to speak for them. At that time, I was living in the dorm and so we realized that we were very privileged because we actually, had maids at that time. Be it, basically African American women that cleaned our bathrooms, make our beds, and things like that and we got, we managed to establish a relationship with them and we found out about the poor working conditions and the struggles they had to take care of their families, and so we decided to advocate for their interests. And socially the African American students were really not included in the mainstream of campus life and meaning that the decision-making mechanisms about student life, we really were not included.

The way that I see it is that Ezekiel Cullen who was one of the founders of the University of Houston, I think it was around 1957, he had said that, "No nigger will never enter this institution," and when we got to the University of Houston administration- administratively it was a lily-white school. The only thing that had **so**me degree of inclusion was the athletic department in terms of some high profile black athletes, and my first year there I did play

football so I decided to go out and join the football team and made the football team and played that first year at the University of Houston. Of course my heart was not into football. It was, basically in advancing the interest of African American students, and in the process of us advancing the interest of African American students we made our alliance with other students, particular students of color at the university who were very empathetic and sympathetic to the struggle that we were launching at the University of Houston.

EW: So you had alliances with other student organizations, those of color. Did you also have alliances with students at Texas Southern University?

OLA: Yeah, we had a real strong kinship and friendship with the students from Texas Southern University and of course, they were involved in various struggles too, and so, it was a reciprocity. We supported their struggles, which we adopted as our own struggles, and they supported our struggles, so we had a cross-fertilization where they would come down Wheeler Avenue and support us and we would go up and support them, and then we would mutually get involved in student organizations. Excuse me community-based activity I should say. If there was an instance-instances, police misconduct, if there was instances, of environmental racism we all tried to participate in trying to eradicate those injustices. So, we protested together, we protested at the Holmes Road dock where the student drowned at Holmes Road dock, and we worked with the Friends of SNCC at Texas Southern. So at that time there was some very powerful leaders with the Friends of SNCC - Dr. Franklin Alexander Dubois and a number of other student, kind of, I would say a adjunct faculty leaders like Dr., I mean Reverend Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick who was also one of Dr. King's lieutenants and was a troubadour. We, having formed very close relationships with the Friends of SNCC at Texas Southern University, and then we met powerful activists there of like Esther King and Charles Freeman, we made

alliance with Mickey Leland who went on to become Congressman Mickey Leland. And so there were a host of well-known, young people like us and there were some not well-known young people like us, but they were all interested. I think that what, what, anybody has to understand, at that particular time it was not that solely that we chose to do what we do on our own volition, it was that history chose us.

The country was in turmoil. There was a great deal of ferment in the country at that particular time. There was a feeling that the United States was in a great change. The, the, there was a lot of social ferment around the war in Vietnam at that particular time. The Black Awareness Consciousness Movement, had somewhat, the progressive part of it had merged with the Anti-War Movement. Women were on the move in terms of fighting for women rights. Students were on the move, but the greatest antagonism that existed in the country, I think was represented by the Black Liberation Movement, and the fact that we had an incomplete democracy. So what the University of Houston was about was an incomplete democracy and what was happening in the society was really about a movement for a complete democracy. Of course, the democratic movement had not consummated or come to completion, but progress had, had been made. But it was all wrapped up with some larger events that were taking place. I mean, the movement that Dr. Martin Luther King was involved in, as a leader, the movement that, that Stokely Carmichael and countless students, John Moses were involved in and in the Deep South, all of that had an impact upon students in Houston, Texas. The generation of students that came prior, that, that, that desegregated, led the movement to desegregate public facilities, especially, lunch counters in Houston, that had a very powerful effect on us coming on into the University of Houston. So really the University of Houston had made this progress, but they were somewhat stunted and deformed because they had made progress by excluding the

people whom the backs, who, whose backs had built democracy. We had contributed so much to educational equality in this country and so, therefore, our mission at the University of Houston was not only to lift us or the boats that were stuck on the bottom, our mission was also to liberate the University of Houston from some of the inhumanity it had by having policies of exclusion. Now, I would like to say that there were certainly some enlightened elites at the University of Houston who recognized that our movement or the movement we were involved in had really signaled a time that had come, and they recognized that, but they didn't know how to facilitate the change, and, of course we didn't know exactly how to facilitate the change, but we just knew that change had to happen, and what I think is important to realize, many of us came from, most of us came from working class families. We might have been, you know, working class to what was recognized as middle-class, but at that time the middle class didn't have a sharp demarcation between the working class at that particular time.

So, in regard to myself, Lynn Eusan, Deloyd Parker, Gene Locke, and all, Veronica Dorian, and Shara, and Michelle Bonds, and all of those people who came into the University of Houston, there was a feeling that we had a mission to achieve. Other people had done the reaping, the sowing, but we were in the position to do the reaping, and so it meant that we had to come in, we had to have an achievement orientation, do the very best that we could at the University of Houston, but at the same time that was a movement afoot to transform the entire country, and so we felt that we had to play our part in regard to this movement to transform the entire country. What I'm suggesting is that we didn't know exactly what path this movement would take when we first got involved, but as it began to mature we felt that we had to carry our basic demands to completion, and so by the time we graduated from the University of Houston we could clearly measure and see that the change was beginning to take root at the University of

Houston. In other words, we were seeing an African American studies program emerging. We were seeing a, we were seeing black instructors. We were seeing black counseling staff. So we were seeing a lot of vast changes taking place at the University of Houston, and of course it was not, there was a cost to be paid. We had to survive charges of inciting a riot, destruction of public property, so we had to put up a legal fight. Now one thing I will respect is that unlike many places in the country, when we were charged with inciting a riot and destruction of public property we never missed a day at school. In other words, the university administrators, they respected due process of law. We were not put out of school. We could continue to stay there and matriculate, and that, that's a very beautiful thing when so many of our counterparts were actually thrown out of school.

EW: Now, in dealing with a lot of the legal repercussions that came from you and other students fighting for democracy as you say, you had people that stood by you legally. Would you like to talk about to some of the legal help that you and other students had that kept you [ ] ?

OLA: Yeah, we elicited, and hired, two African American lawyers, Bobby Caldwell and attorney Raymond Jordan. Raymond, matter fact, was a teacher at the law school at Texas Southern University and Bobby Caldwell was a very well known activist, lawyer at that time. We raised all of our funds and resources from nickels and dimes and dollars of the community. The community was very generous in terms of the fundamental items that we needed to defend ourselves. I'm talking about transcripts and things of that nature. We got one hundred percent entirely from the local African American community, and of course, Raymond and Bobby, the attorneys, they in fact were very gracious and gratuitously donated some gratuitously, donated

many of the legal services that we had, but we had a five day trial and we were acquitted, here in Houston.

EW: So, your, your organization fought for and was pivotal in establishing an African American studies program at U of H and not only that, but getting professors there. You mentioned earlier about the Holmes Road dump and I read the work of one historian that suggested that might have been one of the factors leading up to the TSU riot, would you speak for, from your recollections of the TSU…

OLA: Well, well, what I remember is that the, the pitch of the struggle in the community was raised because of the whole Holmes Road dump crisis. In other words, the tensions began to peak as a result of the Holmes Road crisis. And there were TSU students, there were University of Houston Students. As a matter of fact, Lynn Eusan, played a very prominent role and she was arrested and went to jail, a result of the Holmes Road crisis, but it was the fact that these struggles such as the Holmes Road dump, they have a way of maturing you in a different way, a way that no classroom can mature you. It's, it's a laboratory that you can't have in the classroom, and so you had these various individuals who were coming together, they were finding common cause, they were sharpening their analysis of the social conditions in the community, they sought a nexus between the social conditions in the community and those on the campus, and the story of what happened at TSU was fundamentally that you had a reactionary administration that was slow to recognize how accelerated the change process or the pace of change that had begun at Texas Southern University. So they didn't understand that there was no way to go back to the old order, that you were going to have to close Cooley Avenue, but at the same time, there was so much activity, protests in the nation that it all seemed to fuse together, and the police, under the police chief decided that they were not going to have circumstances where you could have the

type of disruption, the, the rupture of the tranquility that we have in Houston, Texas, and they were going to do anything that they could to suppress that so what was essentially peaceful protest, there was some what you might call some of the extreme civil disobedience and there was even some property destruction taking place in terms of trying to deter the motorists by throwing bricks at them and things of that nature- from coming down the campus.

The police overreacted from a call that they received from a Texas Southern University representative about violence and they decided that they were going to do a wholesale, invasion of the campus and I was not on the campus at that particular time. I did participate in the protests against the campus, having the street to run through the very middle of it, but I think officially what was found is that the policemen who deceased, is that, he was actually hit from a ricocheting bullet that the police fired. It was a police bullet that killed a policemen who, who came on the campus. This city basically, did not have an urban what some people call riot, but I'm calling it rebellion, this city escaped an urban rebellion, and it was for a number of reasons that it escaped a rebellion. Much of the progress that was made in the city was due to some forward thinking leaders and they understood that the bottom line was economics and the economics were going to be seriously impaired if that was the type of rebellion that had taken place at other places, and they were forward thinking enough to say that we've got to get out, get with this change and we have to help usher in this change. And this was the same circumstance at the University of Houston because you had the forward thinking folks like Dean Yardley, who was like, he was the Dean of Arts and Sciences. He was an entirely decent human being. He was caught between an administration that wanted to gradually make changes and you had a group of impatient students who, felt that the pace of change was not fast enough, and so there were various blocks at the University of Houston that understood what our demands were all about

and who wanted those demands to be taking place on the fast track. That was Dr. Robert Haynes who was the Chairperson of the Department of History and our first sponsorer at the University of Houston that was Dr. Donald Lutz, Lutz, in Political Science who was one of our sponsorers at the University of Houston. They more or less, played a very good role in helping to shepherd us to the point that we could gain the legitimacy that we needed to make the challenges that we did need. I think that initially, President Hoffman reacted very badly to our demands. And of course he had no blueprint or no precedent to really understand dealing with a real loud and vocal group of students on campus. So, I'm not going to really hold that against him, especially in view of the very fine institution that the University of Houston has become.

EW: I'd also like to ask you then about something that also involved some U of H students. What are your recollections, about how Shape Center came about?

OLA: Well, we made the transition from the University of Houston to the African Americans for Black Liberation in 1968. I mean from the Committee on Better Race Relations to the African Americans for Black Liberation and we actually then moved off campus and we moved into a neighborhood which is really within a stone's throw of where Shape Center is today, and as a matter of fact, Deloyd Parker, Gene Locke, and a bunch of us moved into the same neighborhood and we began enrichment community activities for the children of that community, and that must have been around, I'm thinking firmly, around the summer of '68. Excuse me, I'm thinking that that might have been around the April or May of '68. And at that time, with the enrichment activities taking place in the neighborhood, that became the genesis of Shape Community Center, and the vision was actually formed as an offshoot of the African Americans for Black Liberation. All of us got behind these community building and enrichment

activities in 1968. All of us got behind that and to the credit, tribute to Deloyd Parker for staying with that effort and actually institutionalizing the Shape Community Center.

EW: One final question. That is, how do you see that that era has left its mark on your life, what do you see as the work that needs to be done now?

OLA: Well that era, I talked to you about sowing and reaping and I used that farming analogy to say that in the same way that Frederick Douglass talked about is that if there's no way that your going to cultivate the ground without rain and thunder. Power concedes nothing without a demand, so it takes struggle. It might be a moral struggle, it might be a physical struggle, but it must be a struggle. So just as we are beneficiaries are people who put everything on the line- blood, sweat, and tears. I think about Lynn Eusan, who is no longer with us and that it speaks to one of the things that I think that we've got to speak to in terms of the present generation. Lynn was killed by a predator, sociopath, psychopath, pretty much certain that it was a black man who killed her. In other words, the struggle that we were involved with, the struggle is not complete. It appears that there are elements in our communities who have been demoralized, de-humanized, the social attack has been so fierce that they don't see themselves as a part of this movement to build communities and elevate it. So, they know and they prey upon our own people and communities and I'm suggesting that, in memory of Lynn Eusan, we've got a lot of work to do when we can lose a jewel like Lynn Eusan to the fratricide. When I look at all of the violence that has taken place, when I look at the destructiveness associated with the hip-hop movement, the gangster, the thug kind of movement, it's almost a repudiation of all of the work, struggle, blood, sweat, and tears that has taken place. It's disgraceful and it is in fact, disgusting. The verdict to me says that in many ways we've gone backwards, but we have to remain optimistic. We know what people of good will can do when they work together. So I think that

we've got to continue to build coalitions and alliances, and we've got to have a vision for the future. To me, the best way to bring about the future we want is to actually invent, to build the future we want ourselves.

EW: Thank you so much Mr. Allen. I'm going to ask you one more time to state your name and where you're from.

OLA: My name is Omawale Lithuli Allen. I am a 1970 graduate of the University of Houston School of Political Science. I am currently working with human rights causes here in Houston, and also working with crime prevention causes in Houston. Officially, I work as a social worker, case manager.