
P E T E R S B U R G
V O I C E S O F C I V I L R I G H T S :
T H E O R A L H I S T O R Y

INTERVIEW OF JUANITA OWENS-PENN WYATT

conducted by

Hermanze Fauntleroy

Petersburg, Virginia

HALASZ REPORTING & VIDEOCONFERENCE
P.O. Box 1644
Richmond, VA 23218-1644
(804) 708-0025
Transcribed by: George M. Halasz, RDR

(Interview of Juanita Owens-Penn Wyatt
conducted by Hermanze Fauntleroy.)

BY MR. FAUNTLEROY:

Q Good afternoon. I am Hermanze Fauntleroy, and today I shall be interviewing Mrs. Juanita Owens Wyatt in reference to the Petersburg civil rights era and other information that she might have available in some other localities and situations that she was involved with. We appreciate the fact, Mrs. Wyatt, that you were able to take the time today to come and be with us.

A Thank you.

Q From your period of time at Peabody High School, did you recognize and give any thought to what the conditions in Petersburg were at that time?

A Well, I knew we had old books. I knew that. I knew that we went to separate schools. I knew that we had to get on the bus and go all the way to the back, but my parents wouldn't allow me to ride the bus. They said we would walk or be driven. That was humiliating to them to see me go all the way to the back of the bus, so I never did ride the bus until I was 21 years old.

Q After your graduation from Peabody and

having knowledge of those types of conditions, I think you indicated to me that you went -- you left Petersburg to go to college.

A Right.

Q Where did you go to college at that time?

A Greensboro, North Carolina for my undergraduate work at Bennett College, all girls school, and the emphasis was not just on education, but was on etiquette, also.

Q At the time that you were in Greensboro, did you witness any beginning of involvement with the civil rights era?

A Well, the marching and sit-ins started in Greensboro, the three or four students, I can't remember the exact number, but I think it was three students from A&T, and I remember calling my mother and asking her if I could go and picket and sit in. And my mother was such a lady and very cautious in her ways, and she told me not to go. I cried.

But I went and stood across the street and watched them standing with their placards and so forth, but I gave them my spiritual support, always believing that what your mother says is right.

Q During that period of time, what was

taking place in terms of the actions, if you will, that resulted from those students initiating that sit-in in Greensboro?

A I remember it was Walgreens, and it was almost on a competitive state with the other colleges. Bob was probably -- I'll just say Bob -- Bob and his friends were jailed, and was ten of them. And so then it went all around the south, you know, the various other colleges, but we have 15 that have been jailed, even though they had the sincerity of the concern of the situation, it was very competitive like a sports game.

I also met Martin Luther King in 1957, my sophomore year. I'll always know his age because he was born exactly ten years from my age, and he had just founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and that was when he had a membership drive, and all of us girls, of course, he was magnetic and charismatic, and we joined, and he gave us the desire to want to serve, and I think that has been -- he has been one of my role models through my life.

Q At what point did you leave Greensboro after graduating from Bennett?

A 1960, graduated in May, 1960 and I came

home and that -- I really came home and it was the midst of the sit-ins in Petersburg, Virginia. And I got married a few months later. And I was married by the founder of Virginia state unit of SLC, Dr. Milton Reid, and he married me, and we were at the reception, and he said, I cannot stay and join the festivities with you. He said, I would like for Juanita to come with me, but she can't because she has to enjoy her wedding. I'm on my way to jail. And then he gave a prayer.

And I didn't picket or march myself, but I was used as a chaperone, and I watched the boys and girls, and my sister was one of them, with their placards, and they were very well mannered. People jeered, said all kind of disrespectful things to them. And it was -- I don't think we really realized the danger, but it was a very dangerous, touchy situation.

I remember when my sister was jailed, and my mother and I went to retrieve her from the jail, and Judge Campbell, before you could pick up your children, he had to talk to you in a very patronizing speech. He had all of the parents there in this room, and he talked to us like we, who were adults, were children. And he was trying to

influence us to influence the children not to continue to picket.

Q Very interesting. Very interesting.

A Yes.

Q Yeah. So your sister Camelia --

A Uh-huh.

Q -- was jailed. When she was arrested, was she picketing or sitting in one of the facilities on Sycamore Street; do you recall?

A I recall Camelia being at the library, at the Trailways Bus Station, and out in front of I think it was Woolworth's, but I can't remember at which location she was jailed.

Q When you were in your wedding reception and Reverend Reid indicated that he had to leave because he would be going to a situation where he knew he would be arrested --

A Right.

Q -- do you recall whether or not that situation on that day was the time that he and Reverend Walker and maybe Reverend Williams and others attempted to integrate the Petersburg Public Library?

A I think -- I can give you the date. It was a Saturday, July the 30th, 1960, and I do

believe that was the time because it was his intention to being jailed.

Q Do you remember the mass meeting that was held as a result of that effort to integrate the library and the fact that they were arrested?

A I remember a mass meeting at Zion, Zion Baptist Church, and it was just like it was a revival. People were really concerned, and they were motivated, and as I said before, I don't think they feared the danger. They knew that it was a cause, and they knew that things were -- situations were going on where it had to change, and we were all equal, and we needed to fight for our rights.

Q Do you recall whether in that mass meeting that was the beginning of the Petersburg Improvement Association?

A I do believe that they did discuss that, but I don't remember in total detail, but that was the beginning.

Q And at that point in time did the people present or at least many of them volunteer, if you will, to become an active part of the beginning of the struggle?

A Yes, and you were one of them.

Q That was quite, quite a time. You

indicated that your participation at that point, when you were here, was geared to chaperoning persons on the picket line and I guess mostly young students. You have also indicated to me that you traveled to Tennessee to participate in some training sessions.

A Yes, I participated.

Q What were they all about?

A Well, Fannie Lou Haimer, that's when I met her, and it was called Non-Violent Strategies and Tactics, and I witnessed a practice test, and I was a little leery because they were pouring water on us, and they were taunting, but I knew that I had to adjust and be ready to do whatever I had to do.

I went with my father. I went with Joseph H. Owens, Sr. I went with Reverend Milton Reid. I went with Herbert Coulton, who was a national officer of SCLC at that particular time, and this was SCLC sponsored.

Q You've indicated earlier that the persons that you were chaperoning on picket lines in particular were non-violent and they carried themselves in such a way that they always showed respect, let's say, for what was going on around them. Did that type of training on your part and

others come out of the Tennessee training?

A Yes. That was it. I believe it was Lookout Mountain, that area. And this was the Tennessee training. I can't remember all of -- time passes, but it was very intensive, and you had to have a strong will, and you had to have the resistance, resistance not to come back at what was said to you. And it was very difficult, but it was rewarding in a way because it proved that you could be strong in a non-violent, humble way.

Q Was there significant participation on the part of people in Petersburg to volunteer to serve in those situations, picketing, sit-ins, et cetera?

A Oh, it was massive, because you had the high-school students, you had the college students, you had the housewives, and there were teachers who took a great chance.

Q Do you recall any situations that developed as a result of the persons serving on the picket line or sit-ins that might have been somewhat tending to create violence?

A I remember one incident where someone was spat upon. That's the only one, you know. No body touching, but a lot of vocal, verbal harassment.

Q Prior to the time that -- well, I guess

during the period of time when you returned to Petersburg after having been in Greensboro, what was your opinion, if you will, and how did you feel in reference to the conditions in Petersburg and what was happening to blacks or African Americans at that period of time?

A Well, you know, you could look at television and see the horses, and the hoses, and Petersburg went through -- you know, you can go through all kinds of suffering and it sometimes doesn't have to be physical suffering. I saw more physical suffering further south, but Petersburg went through the mental suffering, the suffering of wondering whether you were going to be arrested, wondering whether you were going to lose your job, just living on the edge.

Q You've indicated earlier that when you were in high school at Peabody High School that you knew that there was a difference.

A Separate but equal, but it wasn't. They said separate but equal, but it was separate and unequal, because the books were very worn. You didn't have the repair work done as readily as some of the repair work in the Petersburg High School building. Everything was just slowed down.

However, if I may say --

Q Yes. Yes. Yes.

A The intellect of the teachers and the way we were taught was excellent. You will find right now that the -- from 1870 to 1970 students of the old Petersburg High School very well-educated people, and I am proud to say in that respect as far as the intellect of the teachers and the exposures, it was excellent. But the inequities of the physical plant, the infrastructure, the materials, we accomplished all of that with so much lacking, and I think it's tremendous.

Q So it's your opinion that notwithstanding the fact that materials, textbooks, et cetera --

A Uh-huh.

Q -- at Peabody --

A Right.

Q -- not being the same as they may have been at Petersburg High School --

A Right.

Q -- did not deter the teachers from providing the type of education that you think caused the black students at that point to really progress --

A Right.

Q -- even without those kinds of situations that might have --

A I know a sense of pride, a sense of wanting to succeed, a sense of wanting to do something for your community, and I think the graduates took it with them when they went far and wide.

Q Do you think that there are any differences in terms of Petersburg today versus Petersburg at that particular time positively?

A That's an interesting question. Well, when I came back in '78 there were no African American constitutional officers. We had excelled on a political plane with the Democratic Party. We had Democratic chairs and so forth, but -- well, we're holding certain positions, and key positions in the city now. And just like a commercial says, we've come this far, but we have far to go. I think there are a lot of things that need to be helped.

One thing, if you are looking at -- if you are thinking about the physical plane of Petersburg, Petersburg was the hub of the tri-cities area, and it is no longer the hub anymore. And there's a disparity. Up and down Halifax Street, that was the black business section. And during

that time you had more black business owners than you have now.

Q As I recall, your family, particularly through your father, had a long-time business on Halifax Street as a part of what you just described. Did he talk about the situation in terms of what was going on in reference to the Halifax Street area and what he was trying to do as far as the business area was concerned?

A Yes, he formed what later became Halifax Business Association. He felt that if we all network together we could do more and influence more. I have a problem with black cooperation. He had a knack for getting along with a lot of people. So I guess it's how you approach the situation. He had a long desire that the Halifax Street Association would cause more businesses and I think he would be very saddened to know that we don't have as many businesses now as we did then.

Q In 1964, as I recall the year, your father was elected to the Petersburg City Council obviously against all odds because we were on an at-large system.

A That's right.

Q -- at that point in time, so you had --

people --

A The whole city.

Q -- across the entire city who were either for you or against you.

A That's right.

Q Once he was elected and began to participate, do you recall any conversations maybe at home where he talked about his experiences with other council members and how he might have been treated?

A Well, he was the first African American since Reconstruction.

Q Yes. Yes.

A And it was strained in the beginning. My father was a very gentle -- he had a gentle spirit about him, and I think there are certain kinds of personalities that would -- people, white people would feel threatened, and I don't think that my father was a threat, they felt a threat to him. They had to take time to warm up to him.

And he was very proud when you joined the city council, Mr. Fauntleroy.

Q Well, during that period of time, of course, your father and I worked together to cause the Petersburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority

to be developed and organized.

A Yes.

Q Prior to that time, the living conditions in Petersburg were deplorable, if you will?

A Yes.

Q Do you see any change in that type of condition in Petersburg today and whether or not blacks now are able to move into certain neighborhoods that they may not have been able to move into prior to that time?

A Oh, yes, and it has greatly improved. We have -- during the time I was in high school you did not have blacks living in Walnut Hill, and they are all over Walnut Hill now. And it is interesting that you would say the Petersburg Housing Authority, because you -- the two of you, you know, helped that to be established, and I have just been recently been appointed to the Petersburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority, so I shall seek your guidance on that.

Q Interesting. Interesting. I'm sure you will enjoy that in terms of being able to continue to help people.

A Yes.

Q Is there anything else that you can recall

that happened in Petersburg that you remember that adversely affected African Americans at that time where the situations may have now softened a little bit along those lines?

A I would imagine just the interchange between other ethnic groups, especially the majority at that time of the white population. However, we as African Americans are in the majority now even though population-wide, African Americans are in the majority, but I don't think that they are majority in the policy making positions.

Q Do you recall when you were here, and I recognize that you left the Petersburg area for a while, but during the height of the period of time when you were here, do you recall what the involvement of the churches was at that time?

A Oh, yes. The church was the center, it was the nucleus, it was the innovator, it was the protector, and the ministers were the guiding force in the civil rights movement. And I don't know whether I could say that now, that the church -- I'm not saying that they are not involved now, but I don't think people look to the church in the way that they did then during that time.

Q Do you think that the involvement, if we

were to have the same type of involvement as we did in the sixties in particular, that that might provide some additional impetus, if you will, in reference to African Americans maybe being more involved in causing this city to move or continue to move in a direction that takes into consideration all of the people in the city?

A Well, you know, African Americans have always placed ministers in high regard, and this is not a complaint of ministers, it is a critique, where I think if they would step forward and use their institutions to be a gathering point for innovation and networking among the city.

Q In relationship to segregation in the City of Petersburg, do you remember what the situation was with what we refer to as Petersburg General Hospital at that time --

A Yes.

Q -- in relationship to blacks and whites?

A Yes, I remember. I remember when it was built. I remember when they went from door to door to collect money so that we could have a hospital. I remember what stood there at the hospital before the hospital was a castle. But going back to how blacks were placed in the hospital, we could not

even go through the front entrance. We would go through the side entrance.

And I grew up in that section, it was Bunker Hill at that -- it is still called Bunker Hill. It was a great disparity on placement of patients. We only had a certain set number of rooms. And if you had empty rooms in the white wards, you still couldn't go there, so you had to be in the hallway. I remember that.

Q Do you think that there has been any significant change in terms of those conditions in what now is referred to as Southside Regional Medical Center?

A Well, Southside is no longer a public hospital. It is a privately endowed hospital. And I was an advocate against that movement. And when you are private, you know, there are certain rules and regulations that don't have to necessarily apply to you as far as city ordinances, you know, are concerned, and I am very concerned by the hospital becoming private.

Q Where do you think Petersburg really is today and where we as a city may be going in relationship to involving the citizens of this city as a total citizenry?

A Well, I have not been to the meetings. I understand it is called the List Project, and then they have some other projects going on. And it seems that we might be at the front door, I'll say, of trying to redevelop our city. And I think it's different because they are asking for public attendance of all persons to come out and give suggestions on how the city should be planned. And I think that's excellent, because no one person knows all of the needs of Petersburg, and I hope that this is a beginning.

Q Well, Mrs. Wyatt, we certainly appreciate your taking the time to come and be with us this afternoon.

A Well, thank you very much.

Q And you have obviously shared with us I think some very critical information and talking about your experiences in Greensboro and Washington, D.C., and of course obviously your home city, Petersburg, so again, thank you very much for being here.

A You are welcome.

Q And we really appreciate it.

A Thank you.

Q Thank you.

