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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

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INTERVIEW OF WILLIS BROWN

conducted by

Hermanze Fauntleroy

March 9, 2007

Petersburg, Virginia

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(Interview of Willis Brown  
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BY MR. FAUNTLEROY:

Q I am Hermanze Fauntleroy. Today is March 9, 2007. I shall be interviewing Mr. Willis Brown in reference to the civil rights era in the City of Petersburg, and some of what took place at that time and his knowledge of what took place as he knows it. Mr. Brown graduated from Peabody High School, which I think is critical in this situation because we had segregated schools at that time.

Q And he was a part of that system. Mr. Brown, do you have any memory of violation of civil rights, your civil rights in the City of Petersburg, and what do you recall the situation was during that time?

A Well, growing up in Petersburg I experienced this as a young child, shopping downtown in the department stores. I always observed water fountains, which were marked "Colored" water fountains at certain stores, and I didn't understand what that was all about. However, I had occasion

1 to go there to take a sip of water and it always  
2 seemed normal. But in my mind, I always wondered,  
3 why was it marked as such. That was one  
4 of my earliest recollections of it.

5 Q At that time when you noticed that that  
6 was the situation and you tasted the water and  
7 didn't see any difference in it, so to speak, what  
8 type of effect or what type of impact did that have  
9 on you as a young child growing up under those  
10 conditions?

11 A Well, I had great interest in what was  
12 going on, but being young, I didn't ask anybody. I  
13 just thought that was a fact of life, that was the  
14 way life was, and I didn't question it so much then.

15 Q In reference to later, as you became older  
16 and you grew up, began school, and of course the  
17 schools were at that time segregated in the City of  
18 Petersburg, did you give any further thought to what  
19 you had experienced earlier?

20 A Yes. Most definitely. We just didn't ask  
21 adults, you know, what was going on as we just  
22 thought it was the way of life to go along with the  
23 situation that was at hand. However, in school we  
24 noted a difference in maybe the books we were using  
25 may have been used, they weren't very new books.

1 Some were. And a lot of sports equipment was used  
2 when we got it, they weren't the best, but we made  
3 the best of what we had and created some  
4 championships. This was one of the things that I  
5 noticed in school life that seemed to have an effect  
6 on me.

7 Q Did you give any thought to the fact that  
8 there may have been some difference between being a  
9 student at Peabody High School and what you thought  
10 may have been happening at Petersburg High School  
11 during that period of time?

12 A Yes. I knew it was a segregation thing  
13 was -- there was the Peabody High School and the  
14 Petersburg High School, and we had our differences,  
15 you know, as the high school. All through  
16 graduation I thought this is the way life was going  
17 to be. I didn't question that much about it. But I  
18 just tried to adjust my life and go on with it and  
19 make the best of what I had to do with it anyway.

20 Q When you recognized the fact that white  
21 students in the City of Petersburg were attending  
22 Petersburg High School, and all of the black  
23 students were attending Peabody High School as far  
24 as the high school education is concerned, did you  
25 give any real thought to why this was happening this

1 way?

2 A Oh, yes. Most definitely. I know in  
3 Peabody School it was some smart kids and we weren't  
4 any different from anybody else. We had people that  
5 made honor roll as well. That -- I guess  
6 we were just separate as  
7 children going to different schools.

8 There was picketing down  
9 Sycamore Street. As a child I wanted to be a part  
10 of it to make a difference, however, I wasn't able  
11 in that way to go, but I knew that the sit-ins at  
12 Woolworth's and McClelland's downtown were to make  
13 things better for us, but I unfortunately did not  
14 participate, however I did want to do that.

15 Q Well, as you mentioned Sycamore Street,  
16 what was happening particularly on Sycamore Street  
17 in the stores, what we refer to as the five and dime  
18 stores at that time --

19

20 Q -- we recognized that there was a  
21 difference; if you went in the store --

22 A Oh, yes.

23 Q -- to spend your money that there was no  
24 problem in the store accepting your money for the  
25 merchandise --

1

2 Q -- that you were buying, but if you wanted  
3 to sit at the lunch counter --

4

5 Q -- you might have been able to buy a  
6 hotdog, but you couldn't sit and eat it there.

7 A Right.

8 Q Did you see any problem with that? Did  
9 you give any real consideration as to why?

10

11

12 A Yes, I did. It came across my mind  
13 several times while shopping, like you said, and  
14 wanting to purchase a meal --

15 to eat here in the store

16 or to go? It definitely was to go. That was  
17 definitely a fact.

18 You couldn't eat a meal down on Sycamore  
19 Street at that time.

20 Q Did you, consider  
21 that there was a difference between you as a black  
22 and whites who were able to sit at that lunch  
23 counter and eat?

24 A Yeah. I knew it wasn't a difference between us. I  
25 knew it, because in some of these restaurants they

1 had blacks serving and even preparing foods, but yet  
2 and still we could not eat there. That bothered me  
3 a great deal.

4 Q Do you recall the fact that there was a  
5 struggle developing, if you will, in terms of trying  
6 to make a difference in that situation, those  
7 conditions in reference to the City of Petersburg?

8 A Yes, it was a struggle. I knew there was  
9 different meetings, tried to make things better for  
10 blacks, and they had a lot of mass meetings around  
11 town, trying to get things equal for all people, and  
12 I was aware of all of this going on and I wanted to  
13 be a part of it. I did attend a lot of mass  
14 meetings to see how this was carried out, and it wasn't  
15 a difference as people, black or white, it was just  
16 the way we were separated at that time.

17 Q Do you recall any of the people,  
18 particularly ministers in the City of Petersburg who  
19 were involved and who were making strides to try to  
20 cause changes to take place?

21 A Oh, yes. My pastor at Zion Baptist Church  
22 years ago, R. G. Williams, was greatly involved in  
23 the movement. And various other churches around  
24 Petersburg, they always got together and had the  
25 mass meetings, and this was various explanation for

1 churches to be involved in the situation like this,  
2 but I knew one day things were going to get better.  
3 I knew because we were going in the right direction.

4 Q Do you recall what took place in those  
5 mass meetings in terms of the people attending the  
6 meetings and how the people reacted, to  
7 what was being done in those meetings?

8 A Those meetings were well attended. Most  
9 of the mass meetings they had were full  
10 to the walls, very -- a lot of concern there. They  
11 wanted to do it in a right way, a peaceful way to make  
12 better things -- better for our city,  
13 and I think it did. It just  
14 took patience, people very excited about doing this  
15 in the right manner, a peaceful way.

16 Q You mentioned Reverend R. G. Williams.  
17 Obviously he was deeply involved. Do you recall the  
18 Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker being a part of the  
19 process?

20 A Most definitely. Yes. They always walked  
21 hand and hand, shoulder to shoulder, trying to make  
22 things better for this area, and they succeeded.  
23 Milton Reid of First Baptist Church, was also  
24 involved in this a great deal, and this unity  
25 between the churches, I figured things were going to

1 get better by the sitting in and the mass meetings.  
2 Everybody was real excited about what was going on  
3 to make things better.

4 Q Do you recall the situations  
5 that developed out of those mass meetings? What did  
6 the people do as a result of attending  
7 those mass meetings?

8 A Well, they discussed different issues, how  
9 we were treated, blacks were treated, and they made  
10 sit-ins a whole lot better than what it was. They  
11 performed sit-ins at Woolworth's and W. T. Grant and  
12 other locations such as-- Ruckers-Rosenstock's, places like  
13 that.

14 Q Do you recall that there were a number of  
15 people who participated in picketing and sit-ins?

16 A Yes, most definitely. They normally  
17 marched down Sycamore Street.

18  
19 There were some arrests during that time,  
20 and fortunately the people didn't stay in jail that  
21 long. Just -- a short period of time, they tried to put  
22 fear into people not to do it again, but there was a  
23 lot of progress done through that.

24 Q Did the blacks in Petersburg and the  
25 churches, you've mentioned

1 really become involved in terms of the  
2 number of people growing and more people becoming  
3 involved in the whole struggle?

4 A Yes. A great number of people were  
5 involved in it, however, it could have been much  
6 more, but I think people were afraid of maybe --  
7 getting into trouble, so they backed off, and -- but  
8 it could have been a much greater number involved in  
9 these sit-ins. I think it was still a great number that  
10 participated along with this.

11 Q Based on what you've said, would you say  
12 that most of the churches in the City of Petersburg  
13 at that time really were involved in helping to  
14 cause all of this to happen.

15

16 A Yes. It was the church, it was the  
17 backbone of the church. People had that faith that  
18 they could carry on and change the segregation thing  
19 that was going on and make things better for the  
20 city. Churches had a lot of inspiration in the  
21 people to come, and even the people that weren't  
22 church goers were really involved in these  
23 situations. It was making them better as people in  
24 the city.

25 Q Let me go back to the school system

1 situation for a while. Based on your  
2 responses, the school system was segregated.

3 A Yes.

4 Q And there were separate schools for blacks  
5 and separate schools for whites. In addition to  
6 what you've already said, do you recall any real  
7 differences that you remember in terms of what was  
8 taking place from maybe an educational point of view  
9 as far as the schools were concerned?

10 A The schools -- during my era I think that  
11 we had very qualified teachers that taught us to the  
12 limits. We tried to learn as much as we could. The  
13 educational part of it I thought we were just  
14 getting -- I knew we were getting better -- just as  
15 good an education as Petersburg High was. Today we  
16 have a lot of students that during that era have  
17 gone to high ranks in society, so they had to be --  
18 the education we got from Peabody was just as good  
19 as anywhere else in the state.

20 Q Do you think, do you know whether or not  
21 your teachers had the same type of information  
22 available to them as the teachers at Petersburg High  
23 School might have had?

24 A I think they had good material to work  
25 with. During my era, I think that my teachers

1 had -- they did their homework, so they'd go do  
2 their own research and got more material as much as  
3 they got, but the material that was issued through  
4 the school board I think may not have been accurate,  
5 I give credit to my former  
6 teachers I had in high school. They really taught,  
7 and had the interest in the students, -- they  
8 took the time after school to encourage the extra  
9 mile to really make sure we got the proper  
10 education.

11 Q Do you recall Martin Luther King coming to  
12 the City of Petersburg?

13 A Yes, I do. I recall -- I didn't have the  
14 opportunity to actually see him, but I recall it was  
15 a really big event. During that era I probably  
16 was -- as a young child I had a little job after  
17 school and I didn't get a chance to see a lot of  
18 those things that happened, but I did hear of it and  
19 knowing that he was in town was a great honor.

20 Q Well, as we both know, I'm sure, he was  
21 quite involved in the movement.

22 A Yes.

23 Q In the struggle.

24 A Yes.

25 Q And unfortunately, at a point in time

1       somewhere around 1968 he was assassinated.

2           A     Yes.

3           Q     How did that affect you as an individual?

4           A     It really hurt.  It hurt.  When I heard  
5       about this event happening, it really brought me to  
6       a complete standstill.  I thought, here is an  
7       individual trying to make things better for our  
8       people, and somebody has taken them away.  How  
9       far -- would this happen to anybody else that come  
10      along the way that tried to make things better for  
11      us?  It was a real touching thing.  I just felt like a  
12      dark cloud just came over my life, all of my  
13      surroundings.  It was really a hurting thing.

14          Q     What do you think about the difference, if  
15      any, that period of time during the  
16      civil rights struggle and what the situation or the  
17      conditions are along those same lines as far as  
18      Petersburg is concerned?

19          A     Well, I think Petersburg has come a long  
20      way, however, we have a long ways to go.  It is a lot of  
21      development that has happened around the  
22      city.  We have a lot of blacks that are in  
23      positions now that they weren't in during those days, and  
24      trying to make it, but I'm concerned about the young  
25      people today, not focusing on the right thing in

1 life. And I try to take the time to explain to  
2 young people the experience I had, how it was, and I  
3 hope that they would pay attention and focus to make  
4 themselves better in their dress, in their  
5 appearance, their conversation, what they listen to  
6 from day to day is very important, and if they knew  
7 how hard the struggle was during the sixties and  
8 seventies, they would make better citizens of the  
9 city. My greatest concern is about the children of  
10 today.

11 Q Do you think that there are opportunities  
12 today that blacks really didn't have --

13

14 Q -- during the sixties?

15 A Yes, most definitely. They can set their  
16 goals whatever they want to do, doctors, lawyers,  
17 even now running for president, so the  
18 sky is the limit for children today, if they just  
19 open up and just focus on the right things in life,  
20 set their goals at the ceiling, I think it would be  
21 a great thing if we just get them focused. And we  
22 have to show our children the importance of this  
23 today before somebody else shows them  
24 the wrong direction.

25 Q Well, then do you think there's a need to

1 do some different kinds of things, if you will, to  
2 bring about more understanding of what really  
3 is available for some of those young people that you  
4 are talking about and whether or not there's a need  
5 from an adult point of view, to do what  
6 needs to be done to help them?

7 A Yes. I think adults are really laying it  
8 on line, letting them know exactly what's going on  
9 now. They just can't focus on what need to be done.  
10 They don't believe that the struggle was that tough,  
11 when it actually was, and if we could just stay  
12 focused on them and try to make them believe that  
13 this is the right direction in life, there is no  
14 other way. They got all the opportunities we did not  
15 have -- they ever have. They just must go out and do it.

16 Q Do you think that the struggle during the  
17 sixties then was a situation that really should have  
18 made it better for us and did make it better for us  
19 in terms of African Americans in the City of  
20 Petersburg?

21 A The struggle was a learning experience. I  
22 think that it made it better for us. We  
23 need to just let our young people know that this is  
24 the only way to make a better life for themselves.

25

1           Q     Well, Mr. Brown, I really appreciate your  
2 taking the time to come and share with us today --

3           A     Yes.

4           Q     -- and to provide your opinions of what  
5 did take place and something about what the needs  
6 are --

7           A     Yes.

8

9

10          A     Glad to be here. Glad to share my  
11 experience.

12          Q     Thank you.

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