Interview with Rudy Davenport

March 30, 2004 and April 1, 2004

Interviewer: Bettie Allen

Allen: This is for the African American Oral History Project in Springfield, and I am interviewing Rudy Davenport. Today's date is March 30, 2004. All right, Rudy, let me just say that I'm currently looking at your wall here, of awards, of which there are many, but let's have just a little bit of background on your history. My memory doesn't serve me whether you were born in Springfield. I just looked it up and you were living at – I think it was like 1531 Jackson.

Davenport: Yes. 1431 East Jackson.

Allen: How did you come to Springfield?

Davenport: Well I was really – let's see – I must have been about thirty years old when I came to Springfield, I guess.

Allen: From?

Davenport: Chicago. Yes, I had my early education and everything, although I was born in Crawfordsville, Georgia, my folks migrated to Chicago when I was an infant. I was born in 1928 in Crawfordsville and sometime in 1929 my folks migrated to Chicago. And I had a younger brother that was born in Chicago in 1930. So that's how I sort of got the time of migration in on my family. But I was raised in Chicago, public schools of Chicago. In

fact, I went to Roosevelt University in Chicago. So almost all of my formal schooling was in Chicago.

Allen: Good. Was there a reason for your folks leaving Georgia? I know it was during a period of high migration from the south.

Davenport: Strangely enough, they never talked about it to their children. They just emphasized the opportunities that we had that they were deprived of in Georgia. And they let us know that education was one of the foremost things. And of course, jobs had to be a major reason that they came north.

Allen: What kind of work did your father do?

Davenport: Well he was really in service to white people in the south. That was about the only thing that was open, as far as a job was concerned. And in Chicago, he remained in service; working at a drugstore, and I remember him as a bartender for many years, but he ended up working for the railroad for many, many years. So he retired from the railroad. He did very well. My father was a very steady worker and even in times of very scarce work opportunities, he seemed to always give something to be able to support his family. So looking back upon that time, I can have a great appreciation for what he did.

Allen: I don't know whether that was following Booker T. Washington's theory that you have to have more than one skill in a lifetime. So you just share –

Davenport: Yes, I think that my folks really were driven by need. And they had this great need to have their children have, first of all, a roof over their head and food, and secondly that they had a need to see their children successful. That meant staying in school and whatever they could do to help us towards that success, they would do.

Allen: All right. I'm assuming that your parents, coming from Georgia, did not have much opportunity for education. What was their background in terms of school?

Davenport: Well my mother did a little bit better than my father in that department. My father was barely literate, really, I'd say about a second grade education, if it was that much. What he did was pick it up on his own. He was a good learner and he was a good one to pick up the basics. He picked up the basics on reading and writing and arithmetic, and he was very good at arithmetic, I might add. But that was picked up in spite of the denial of formal education to him. My mother, my grandmother that is, was a schoolteacher in Georgia, so she sort of taught my mother, and so my mother finished high school in Chicago, went to night school and finished in Chicago. She did have some education in Georgia from what her mother had passed on to her.

Allen: I think that's commendable, move from one area to another and…? (unintelligible). Okay now, getting back to why you came to Springfield.

Davenport: Well, I married – my wife is from Springfield, and – I met her in Chicago, and we married in Chicago. And for, perhaps, the first couple of years of marriage we were very happy and things went relatively well. But she developed a mental condition and due to that mental condition she had to have some type of extensive care, and I had to work during the day. So her mother was still living in Springfield. Her mother was Maisie Halford and her mother was born in Cornland, Illinois, which is not far from Springfield –

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: In 1900 as a matter of fact. So her mother lived in Springfield, and had bought a house in Springfield. So I really had no place to turn, but to her mother, for care in taking care of her, because my folks could not do it and I didn't have anyone in Chicago who we could move in with that could do it. So we moved in with her mother at 1429 East Edwards and the first year or so that we were here, that's where we lived, in that house. And her mother took care of her during the day while I first sought work, and then found work, in Springfield. And so I was able to sort of keep that together until we were able to buy a home ourselves in Springfield. And I mean, by that time, her condition had been diagnosed that it was going to be permanent, and it probably would last a lifetime, and so we bought a home, 1431 East Jackson. We stayed there many years and I went to work.

That's basically how I came to Springfield and how I lived in Springfield for many years.

Allen: What kind of job did you have?

Davenport: I was an accountant. I had a degree. At the time that I got here, I had graduated from Roosevelt University, so I did have a degree. And at that time, they had exams for state jobs, and if you scored high on the exams, chances of you getting a job were pretty good. But everything worked very well for me because I came to Springfield in 1966. And that was just in the wake of the civil rights [movement] and Martin Luther King because that happened in 1968. And surprisingly, when things did open up because of the civil rights marches and other things, they seemed to open up in the State of Illinois as far as jobs were concerned, and also in Springfield. So I received the benefits of some of that civil rights work, really, because jobs did open up. In fact, some of the agencies were even going out of their way to see if they could find qualified blacks to move into some of the heretofore white-collar positions that they had, that they did not have blacks in.

Allen: Yes, from what I remember, because later on, when affirmative action officers were installed in these agencies, we talked about fair employment practices – you may remember that the FEP Act…

Davenport: Fair Employment Practices.

Allen: ___(??) …was something that came during the war.

Davenport: Yes, right.

Allen: And all they were talking about were to find qualified people and give them opportunities for jobs. And that was really Federal more than State affirmative action.

Davenport: Yes, affirmative action, yes.

Allen: Do you remember the governor that did the affirmative action thing?

Davenport: No, I don't.

Allen: Okay. It was a governor that followed, or preceded Dan Walker. He was a Republican governor – Ogilvie.

Davenport: Ogilvie.

Allen: Ogilvie. And he lost the re-election –

Davenport: He did?

Allen: Well, on account of he established the income tax.

Davenport: Oh yes, ____(??). Yes.

Allen: And then he went to the affirmative action. I think he was committed and probably shouldn't have advising (??) –

Davenport: Yes, and it took awhile; the first are always the ones that run into difficulties, and other things.

Allen: And sometimes we don't really know what we have to do, and in many cases our Senate(??) and are afraid.

Davenport: Anything new is always a mystery.

Allen: I think I'd be really interested in why she got the ___(??) because I was the first in the region – (unintelligible). You didn't really know what to do. They'd send us away to learn what to do, and they'd come back and they wouldn't let us do what we needed to do. But there were too many, I think, that were afraid to do anything. _____(??) .

Davenport: Sure, sure,

Allen: Okay, now. Since you've been in Springfield you have been in various organizations and I have to congratulate you on ___(??) really good on struggles with housing in Springfield. But_____(??).

Davenport: Probably. I don't keep a chronological record or anything like that, but just to touch on a few things.

Allen: Okay, well let's talk about housing. Because, very often, those who are not intimately involved in housing, we don't understand, why, in the beginning, there wasn't more effort, and then secondly, because we have under the axe, not concentrated or easily concentrated on keeping __(??)

in a block by block (??). What has been your efforts, and (unintelligible) uncovered something –

Davenport: Yes, I was going to say, before the NAACP I always had an interest in civil rights, I guess. I came in on the wave of the Martin Luther King revolution, if you want to call it an internal revolution, but it came on the wave of the civil rights activities that were going on. We were just made aware of civil rights that many of us had been denied. And plus with awareness of some unevenness with your situation and you want to change it, and you can become more knowledgeable of what inequities exist, and there's an urge in us to change things. I don't know, maybe, actually, in the late sixties were the Martin Luther King years, and the early seventies when we came in on the wake of it, started doing things in our neighborhood and our own communities. And I guess one of the earliest things I remember was working with the group called "People on Progress." That was William Washington and a few other people were trying to just bring people in the communities together to take a look at some things, and see if there was anything that we could do to make life better for ourselves and for our children. So "People on Progress," we met, generally around – Bill Washington had been doing this, and I joined with him in that effort.

Allen: Was that more or less, and Bob(??) I know the two of you were (??).

Davenport: It was out of that church, because that's where I met Bill, really, and became aware of what he had been working on and how hard he was working. And of course there was an opportunity for me to link up with someone who thought a little bit like I did, that you really need to do something if you ever expect to find change in your life, you must do something. So we started doing some things to make life better, and he had, and of course still has, a newspaper.

Allen: And give me correct name of that newspaper?

Davenport: You may have me, but I think it's *The Voice*?

Allen: *The Springfield Voice.*

Davenport: It was out of that effort that I really got involved into the NAACP. And I guess what affected me was not so much that I was uncomfortable working with "People On Progress," but I found that I had a need to be linked with a national organization, some group, nationally and regionally, that I could work with, and then – because we were just limited by our little knowledge and sphere of influence, and really couldn't do much.

Allen: And in my mind the NAACP was <u>the</u> key organization. So let me raise the question, why didn't you think about the Urban League?

Davenport: Different type of organization. Urban League jobs, progress, and economic development. The Urban League, and still to this day, are not

focused on civil rights as the NAACP is. The philosophy and the direction of the organizations are just not the same. And it all depends on what it is that you like to do. Personally, I like civil rights, and I guess I was drawn to the NAACP.

Allen: The funding for them, also, is different.

Davenport: Still is. Much different. Still is, because the NAACP, generally, does not necessarily need the funds that the Urban League needs to do their work. You have to remember, the Urban League was staffed by social workers and people who really – I mean, that was the reason for the Urban League and that's how they got their name, to help people, like my folks, migrating to a city, a northern city, and it was to help those people who recently arrived into an environment like that, to find housing that they need, and a job that they need, and other services that – family health services and others that they need in the community, to make lives meaningful and better. And that was very difficult before the Urban League. I mean, if you didn't know someone, and didn't have any relatives, you were sort of left out. And even if you did know someone, and had some relatives, they just did not know all of the resources that may be available to newcomers coming into the city. And that's the social work type activities. Their leaders have been supposed to work with social workers, by and large, and for the NAACP it's been civil rights.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: Sure.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: Yes, sure. And they may have been in tune more with the government wanted, or had a need for it.

Allen: As opposed to __(??).

Davenport: Yes. In other words, we petitioned the government, sometimes forcibly, to do what we think is right. And many times, you better not count on the government because you're really petitioning the government in a vigorous way, to do something that maybe the government hasn't done, or maybe does not want to do. But certainly we believe it's the right thing for the government to do it.

Allen: __(??). What did the NAACP do about __(??) What law or –

Davenport: Well, I don't know. I wasn't particularly, as far as the civil rights part of concern – I worked with housing. And the Fair Housing Act, was the one, the federal, when they did pass it – again, when they passed a group of civil rights laws, that was one of them. So it came in that we had a right to end discrimination in housing. Civil rights, that's what we tried to do. End discrimination, through direct action. We had some marches, we had some lockouts, we had some other things that we did in regards to the housing, and just tried to bring – first of all be offensive(??) to the breaking of the

promise of America, to a certain group of citizens as far as housing was concerned.

Allen: Yes, and you know I'd like to say the breaking of the covenant that had been established through unity from anyone on that end.

Davenport: Sure. Breaking the covenants was part of our target, very much so. That is completely opposed to what many of us take for granted that America stands for, and that is the right of association. And so people were talking about how that violated the law – you have a right to associate with whomever you want, and that's true, but you do not have a right to stop others from associating in the public domain. And generally, the housing – you had to get a license, believe it or not, to build a house and to put it someplace. And you had to register it in the courthouse, and you're doing that with the permission of the government. So that means that with that permission comes certain, if you will, promises, that you said that you will keep, and one is that you will not discriminate.

Allen: And in that process with the housing, ___(??) response about building – (both talking; unintelligible).

Davenport: Well, not as many were actually denied. Let me put it this way. We did some testing and our testing showed that the number of denials were a lot larger that the number who actually came to us with a complaint.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: Yes. So I said about maybe one quarter of – in other words, outnumbered three to one of what we found in our testing. And this is not unusual, because when you go against the establishment and you are an individual, like an individual trying to buy a home in a neighborhood that is restricted to only white people, or has been. It's very difficult to get a volunteer, if you will, to put their life savings into something such as a house, and then look at the possibility in the face and believe that they've made a good decision. To be honest with you, the comfort zone for all of us is really among those who are like ourselves. We've had like experiences, we've had like understandings, we've had a like sympathy for this group of people that can provide us protection and you can live with us in a community, even if the housing was run down, at least you know it was safe from hostility that many first time buyers in a white neighborhood may start experiencing. This was a very real fear.

Allen: And let me tell you that – I want to thank you for giving that cure ____(??) – (unintelligible) information that you were testing, is so relevant _____(??) neighborhood –

Davenport: Well and I think too, that's where belonging to a large organization comes in because whatever it is you wanted to do, generally there was a history of this being done in other communities, in other areas, and they should give us the do's and don'ts. What works and what doesn't. And it's a (unintelligible)

Allen: No, I guess, I don't remember – (long stretch of unintelligible).

Davenport: For housing, there was housing in Illinois, in Chicago.

Allen: (unintelligible) as far as that kind of care, that was made _(??)_in the housing sphere. Last I looked at that (??), at the NAACP and what was happening with the ___ (mostly unintelligible).

Davenport: Well, now, that's something that the NAACP was involved in, but actually the citizens under an organization which has been formed actually started the action for making sure that education was open in Springfield, and then they linked up with the NAACP, who had legal resources, and under Rev. McPherson that effort was successful.

Allen: Were you a part of this?

Davenport: No, I was not a part of it at that time. Not in – yes, I was just getting involved with the NAACP, but not a part of that. I think as I said, it was a new grassroots organization that had been formed for that, and then the NAACP came, and the NAACP had the court order and other people, and then the NAACP took a very prominent role in how that came out.

(break in tape)

Allen: Now, related to housing, was Habitat your major involvement other than another involvement, because I have been a very __(??) we've had different experiences like rehabbing, and buying housing –

Davenport: Sure.

Allen: To help people, so Habitat your first and only?

Davenport: That's my first, and the only one that I had a prominent role in. That one, for some reason, I became interested in it because it's faith-based.

Allen: Okay, so does this mean –

Davenport: That the churches, including the church that I belonged to, Grace United Methodist, I became interested in becoming a member of Habitat for Humanity. So when it was put together in Springfield, that is the board of directors, I was one of the founding members when we put it together in Springfield and established the board. We had a cross section of churches. This was quite interesting to me because, again, that went back to civil rights and the unity that exist between people of goodwill, especially churches and other organizations, labor organizations and others. So Habitat was, to me, an experience that down that road, of being united and getting something done. Secondly, I liked the way Habitat approached it, that is, separate from government subsidy, trying to get a grant or government help, and having the determination that you can actually raise the money and do it yourself, even if it just meant building one house. Oddly enough, in Habitat for Humanity, I think our first house took a year and a half, for us to build, by the time we formed our board and raised the money, and found the family and did all these things, actually putting it

together, I know it was over a year or so. I think it was about a year and a half to put the house together. But now they're up for their fiftieth house in Springfield so –

Allen: That's quite a celebration then.

Davenport: It is quite a celebration. And I was in on the early part of it, and to be honest, I haven't been with them lately. I don't know what they're doing, because they have other people that are able to take over and do things, too.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: And not only that, but I'm finding with the limitations that I have on my time, I just – when others can do, and perhaps do it better, they do.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: Yes. (unintelligible)

Allen: Okay. If you could just say a bit more about how Habitant funds the housing. Is it a credit, or is it a (??) .

Davenport: Eventually, the people who live there buy their own – buy their house. But certainly to fund it initially, we have to raise the money. Someone has to pay for the building materials and the time – we use a lot of volunteer help, that was a thing that I liked about it. A lot of volunteer help and the

family that are going to receive the house, they have to do some type of volunteer service to be eligible for it, so it's really a cooperative project. But it starts with our own pockets and our own sweat and our own whatever, to build it and put it together, once it's completed and turned it over to a family and that family has the obligation to pay for it. And they only pay whatever is the cost. There's no profit in it, there's no interest in it, we don't charge anything like that. So the family gets the home for maybe half or a third of what it would cost on the market, if you take profit and interest out of it, you'd be surprised.

Allen: (unintelligible; both speaking)

Davenport: Everyday, yes, everyday. Yes, that's a factor. We are able to get materials and a lot of things donated, so it really is a great organization.

Allen: Somewhere I read in the paper, or I heard, that there is a place that is collecting materials –

Davenport: Yes, that's other –

Allen: Is that a spin-off or –

Davenport: Yes, it's still the same organization. They're still learning how to do things better, and rather have anything thrown away or discarded, because no one could use it in a particular house, they have now a warehouse where they can collect things in, and people that have a freezer breakdown

or a furnace or something else, and someone has given them a perfectly good furnace that's suitable for that house, one of the tenants can come in and get it at certainly reduced cost, and many of them can get it for free. Donate it for free, they get it for free.

Allen: (unintelligible) that (unintelligible) I had not heard otherwise, something about Habitat (unintelligible) it's so fantastic (unintelligible). What has been (unintelligible)?(Long unintelligible question)

Davenport: Well, as I said, that they are up to at least fifty.

Allen: (??) have you done more than one or two houses a year?

Davenport: Oh, yes, I think they get about two or three houses, especially if they get a piece of land that's suitable for two houses, in other words, a double lot, and they want to put two houses on that instead of one, there's a lot of economic savings to do two houses at the same time, because you save a lot of money that way. Both houses are going to be basically the same, so you're buying for two houses instead of one. It will help, so that you don't have to transport things back and forth and bring the crane and materials and the labor people are working, they're interchangeable between the houses. An electrician finishes on one, they can go into the other, while the plumber goes…

Allen: Well (unintelligible).

Davenport: Isn't that nice?

Allen: Yes (unintelligible).

Davenport: Well I must say, too, because it is faith-based, there's a tithing that goes on with regard to Habitat houses. We believe that 10 percent of what we raise locally should be used to support housing in less fortunate areas and to build houses in places like Haiti or some other very, very, poor countries with inadequate housing. So what we will do is to use 10 percent of all monies raised in Springfield, and build houses outside of the country, in poor areas of the world. I've been to Africa and the Caribbean.

Allen: My job (Long unintelligible).

Davenport: Sure, sure. Well, what I liked about it too is that Habitat for Humanity – like I'll use Haiti as an example because I'm more familiar with the program out there. But it costs them maybe 3,000 dollars to build a house. So you can see we're not talking about what housing costs in the states here.

Allen: Because housing is different.

Davenport: It is different, yes.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: But you've got to remember that 2,000 or 3,000 dollars is an expensive sum for families that are not earning, that it's an impossible task for them to do it on their own. Whereas we can do it through our tithing and other means, it would be impossible for them.

Allen: ____(??).

Davenport: Well, it doesn't make any – really, if you give to the local here, the local is going to use 10 percent to send to the National for that overseas work. If you give to the National it will probably be mostly used for overseas development.

Allen: Okay. And do you have anything else to say about Habitat? What positions did you serve in that?

Davenport: Well I was on the founding board, so after doing all kinds of things along with being a board member, so I served as the treasurer for the – I think – maybe first two years. And then I was elected the president. I did a vice-president one year, and then elected to president for two years. And so it was really being the CEO of the organization for two years. So that was a good experience for me, but as I said, the organizational was successful, and because it was successful, we were able to generate adequate funds and volunteers to move take care of things. I was able to move out into other things….

Allen: And (unintelligible)

Davenport: I don't have a record. I remember that we started in the early days, we started with at least a majority of black families. I remember, by the time I was President, we were building maybe five houses a year, something like that. I'd say three of them were black families. Certainly much more than were represented in the population, there were twice as many. Only because we met the criteria of what Habitat was looking for, which was being poor. We met that criteria. And the most in need. We had more people with children, and other situations where they were in dire need of a place to live. It always hurts, if anything was ever done about it, or if anything could ever be done about it, the people on public aid we couldn't serve, because they were either eligible for a stipend from public aid, and we did not take government money, so that left them out there, we couldn't buy it – maybe that's changed, I don't know, if Public Aid gives them enough money to buy, but I doubt it, because in principle, Habitant for Humanity never did duplicate anything the government was either working on or trying to do. So we wanted to steer clear, that ours was strictly for people who could not get government help.

Allen: (unintelligible) for Habitat?

Davenport: Oh yes, it's a very successful organization, successful in Springfield, and they're serving four or five families a year, and putting them in homes, so that's very good for the future success of the organization. And the funny thing about how the loans work, the more you build, and the more

experience you have, the more success you'll have because you really know how to do things. One of the biggest mistakes that we've made, and it was on my watch, I have to admit, was that we thought when someone gave us a house, we were really getting something for free. But actually what they were doing on some of the houses, not all of them, but some of them, were really in such bad shape, that when we did a cost analysis after completing our work we found out that we could have demolished the house, and built a new house at a fraction of the cost that we put into the house trying to save it. So unless someone really has a penchant for saving old houses, and really, that's good, if they do enjoy refurbishing old houses and have an appreciation for that, then it does save a place for people to live. Some houses, they just get to be so old that they're past their usefulness.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: Sure.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Allen: Rudy, in regard to Habitat, I wonder how you felt as you were a founding father and given a leadership position in that organization, how you felt as a black person, because it was a diverse group; as well as racially integrated?

Davenport: Well I think about it being a faith-based group from the start, that certainly did help me. The people generally were open to the – but I realized early on, that the mission of Habitat actually involved fundraising and some other activities which I was not the equal of others in. Their pockets were much deeper than mine, their contacts much broader. And they were able to do things, even in their church that I couldn't do in my church, because of the limited funds that we have. So having said that, I came to realize, that still is not a reason to avoid my responsibility. They had indicated that they wanted me to be a member of the board, and that they wanted me to assume a leadership position in the organization, so I had to assume everything that entails leadership. That meant talking to other people, and if it meant raising money to fund a house, and they were able to raise it seemingly much easier than I, it just meant that I had to work two or three times as hard to accomplish the same thing. But that was a good experience for me, and it made me understand that certainly as a black person, I may not have all of what some white people have due to their inheritance and other ways in which they receive their wealth, but I did have something and that was my – I had good faith roots. I knew God would put me through, I knew God would see to it, because I thought I was working for God in that enterprise of Habitat for Humanity, and knew that I was working for God. So it really did give me a lot of strength, to be able to bring me through any feelings of inferiority. Many times I guess I was my own worst enemy, because I'd strike out even before I get to the

plate to bat, because I assume that I can't be successful, as maybe some other people in the enterprise, so I will not give it a try. But once I tried it and once I found out that I really did like raising money for a good cause, I didn't have the problem that I thought that I was going to have, then I didn't have a problem when I became President and CEO that I maybe thought that many times because of white people that inherited wealth and deep pockets and other reasons, they have a tendency to believe that they've been there and they know that, and they know better than you know of maybe how to go about doing things. And you should be relegated to maybe the menial labor or something. Certainly they've had experience in management, and you should yield to that experience. I knew the community, certainly I knew the black community, and I knew some things that perhaps they didn't know about the black community, and how proud people of the black community are, and how people in the black community like to be a part of their own future, and to have some say-so. So those houses, as they came up and went through the early beginning, we found out that it was really a wonderful experience bringing consumers in as your partners from the beginning and so that they had a vested interest in their projects.

Allen: (unintelligible). Just in general, not just about Habitat, when you __(??) at the black community has given, _____(??) resources to help others?

Davenport: I can prove that black people have given more (laughs) of their resources. If you look at how much a black person pays, in taxes, I'll just use that as an example. Whereas, a per capita income may be half that of whites, they pay the same amount in sales tax, they pay the same amount in a lot of use taxes that they have, and certainly real estate taxes and other forms of taxation that are really very hard on poor people because they're not proportional. So actually in a way they pay more to help other poor people through their taxes. It's hard, maybe, for others to understand, and that's because they already have a picture of the only thing that black people do is consume the resources of other people. And that's not even - there's no truth to that. But people like to believe things that maybe perhaps make them feel good. And I think that's one of those feel-good things. The poor in America has always paid proportionally more than their counterparts who happen to be better off and are wealthier than they are. In fact, we find that wealthy individuals can influence the government to an extent, where they see that they pay less. And that is one of the privileges of having money, of being wealthy, is that you can influence the government to really take away from those – somebody maybe less fortunate than yourself, and add to their wealth. So it's really a misnomer to think – at least I think so – that poor people do not pay their share. I think they pay more than their share.

(break in tape)

Davenport: I wasn't sure if that's what you wanted, but I'm going to talk on it anyway, because it really was one of the accomplishments of which I'm very proud of. And that came out of People on Progress, I spoke to you about working with William Washington and on this project I worked with him. And that was on the voting rights lawsuit that he had in Springfield. And under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that was a law passed that had to do with the voting rights. And again, this was in the wake of the Martin Luther King Jr. time period, and Martin Luther King Jr. was still living when this was passed. It just made the statement that it's a federal violation for you to have a government which denies black citizens, a class of citizens, and then black citizens, the right to have proportional voting – proportional representation in the voting. And Springfield had a commission form of government where the city council were elected – there were five members on the council at that time, and the council members were also head of a department. But they had to be elected at large. To become a member of that body, someone had to be elected throughout the city by a majority of voters. And this made it virtually impossible for a black person to win. In fact, we took the city to court on it, and the federal judge at the time ruled in our favor, saying it was impossible.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: Yes.

Allen: (unintelligible)…and was there a name to the group?

Davenport: No, there wasn't a name; it was just some individual citizens, but not all NAACP. Each one of the citizens were taken for a particular purpose. The original three that brought the law were Frank McNeil, Bill Washington, and Rudy Davenport. And then the plaintiff group was expanded to include Archie Lawrence and Howard Veal. And this was under the advice of the attorney. McNeil was a part of it, I think he was a county board member at the time, certainly he had been active in the community, and Bill Washington was on People on Progress. I was on it for the NAACP. No, I'm sorry, Archie was NAACP, and I was just People on Progress. That was Bill Washington and I as People on Progress. And Archie was NAACP and Howard Veal was Urban League.

Allen: Who was your lawyer?

Davenport: It was the NAACP attorney-I can't think of his name? I've got him on paper, I can look it up. _____(??).

Allen: Okay. Go ahead and tell us the story.

Davenport: It was like an ad hoc group that came together to accomplish this. And so the NAACP lawyers, they are assigned out of the NAACP legal headquarters in Washington, they came from Washington, together, and that took months.

Allen: (Unintelligible) Just speak a few words on that because I remember…

Davenport: Yes. Okay, yes. The legal portion, the legal defense part, I'd call it. And it was separated from the NAACP, for mainly, the need for them to be independent. They were going into court; they needed to be independent on their suits and other things that they were doing, because the NAACP branches such as we are, may be working on something which is counter productive to what they would be working on. So they formed their own – became their own corporate entity, put out their papers and became an independent organization, although they were still affiliated with the NAACP. They were affiliated as part of the NAACP board of directors, but their operations were separate than that of our operation branch.

Allen: How long did that take you?

Davenport: Well it took, it seemed to take, a long time to develop. (laughs)

Allen: But wouldn't you have to remember that even today, you have some people who don't want to resist(??) and they'll go to court. And it takes years. (Unintelligible)

Davenport: Yes, that's something ____(??) they can't __(??). But it is very (pause) blessed, let me put it that way, how it worked out. Because I believe that the national office was looking for a case on the voting rights.

Allen: You're saying that this was one of the first?

Davenport: One of the first, yes. One of the first. And they decided to really put some resources behind it. And I think there was one other that they were using, and they had to come in with some five or six lawyers talking, consulting, seeing what it was that they could do, and of course this was a massive legal effort so they did not intend to lose it. They did use local attorneys here, I'm trying to think of his name, but anyways, they used local attorneys, and they also used attorneys out of the national office.

Allen: Okay, so it was a combined effort.

Davenport: A combined effort. And these were people in the court room at the time, giving their legal services. And of course, they ask all of the lawyers were there, the question was raised, who's going to pay for all of this legal service that these people were getting here. And of course our lawyers immediately said, "Well the plaintiffs will have to pay for it." (Laughs). If that happens, well we looked at ourselves, the five plaintiffs there, we were up to 400,000 dollars already and still counting. But we did not have to do that because we were victorious in the case. But if we had lost the case, there was a chance that the judge may have found that we have filed frivolously, and might have actually charged us with the attorney fee for this case.

Allen: Going back to the voting rights, okay?

Davenport: Yes, and it was really my first taste of how extensive a litigation can be. But this lawsuit did change the city government. And fortunately for us, we won, therefore the city had to pay our attorneys, and that took care of the cost of bringing the litigation, but the success of it carries over to this day, and we feel it's a good case study, if you will, of something brought by just a few people that had tremendous results on the city. And I guess that's why that voting rights suit stands out in my mind, because of the results that it did accomplish. Not that building a house for a poor family isn't a major result in itself, but we think that the lawsuit helped not only this generation but every future generation of minority, black people, in the city of Springfield. It certainly helped in providing blacks on the city council, there never had been a black before. And when we had the lawsuit, two blacks immediately went on the city council.

Allen: How quickly was that implemented?

Davenport: After they got the procedures for getting – after the order went into effect that people could lead the – first they divided the city into ten districts. That's part of the lawsuit. And as soon as they got the election machinery in place for the next elections that were coming up, there was one ward that we almost certainly would have a black city council person in because the ward was all black, or primarily black. We did have a Alderman elected in that ward, but it came as a surprise, somewhat, that we had another black elected to the city council, and maybe less than two or three

percent black. Well, once we opened it up and it was open, then it did show that we had qualified people who could serve on the city council, and serve with distinction on the city council. So it really did – it made all the difference in the world, I believe, in the quality of life in Springfield.

Allen: Now, you know that that opens up another set of ___(??) have because of you and (unintelligible). Has that affected their relationships?

Davenport: Well, it's hard for me to really see a lot of change because we have forces moving in two opposite directions. One, we have the voter registration that we try to encourage people to register to vote, going one way, and on the other side of it, you have a general voter apathy that goes on in Springfield, and in the country, I might add. If you look at the primary elections, this primary election we were lucky to hit 20 percent, if we got that many. And this is not only the black community, this is whites and everyone. But there's a general apathy that has prevailed with regards to voting, and that apathy is especially prominent, and especially hurts when we see it in the black community, because we realize what a lot of people have gone through to make that right to vote, it's not just a privilege for us. And then because others do it, then we neglect it.

Allen: How much do you think housing has affected…

Davenport: Yes. Well, it hasn't diffused it to the extent – I mean, originally, we knew that one ward would be black and it has not diffused it to that extent. Now,

this is an indictment to how housing patterns are and how deeply they are embedded into our culture. We see scattered site housing and we see other efforts that went out to diffuse the apartments(??), but you have to remember also that we have an influx of black people coming to Springfield. Most of those will live in that identified ward, Ward 2, and that's pretty much why that ward will stay predominantly black. Because even if black people leave and diffuse across the city, you don't see white people from throughout the city coming in to live in Ward 2. So that one ward remains predominantly black, and newcomers to the city that are black take the place of those that move out. So the racial pattern, and it's so deeply anchored into our psyche, it's sort of like having a dog in a doghouse, and you keep locking the door to the doghouse so he can't get out, and then you leave the door open, and guess what, the dog stays in the doghouse. (laughs) He doesn't run out. But anyway, that's another story for another day. (laughs) But it is. Racism is so pervasive and so deeply embedded in our system that I'm beginning to believe that nothing short of a major reconstructive effort can ever change it.

Allen: Now you're saying not only in Springfield but nation-wide?

Davenport: Nation-wide. And maybe even worldwide. I don't know, that type of thing. But we cannot do anything worldwide, but we certainly can do something nation-wide. I think the United Nations should try to do something, but they are limited in what they can do. But certainly the

United States can do something. And I have a lot of people disagree with me on this one, but I'll leave it on the record anyway. And I really believe reparations, in some form, is going to have to take place to generate the type of equality that we're going to need to make our country whole.

Allen: (unintelligible) You probably haven't really talked about employment in particular for the government (unintelligible) You always had X number of people in the police department, and we've always had the garbage department in the city that was run by __(??) but we don't have that now. And I think we're back __(??) they know that under affirmative actions they've got to do something.

Davenport: No, you're right. It's not a pressing issue, and certainly people look at things differently. White people have – and they are victimized by the media and movies and everything else, the same as we have been victimized. And they have an idea, or some type of idea if they should happen to mix with us, that something disagreeable is going to happen as far as they're concerned. There's no good reason why people of any color shouldn't be moving into Ward 2, but there's many psychological reasons that they don't do it. So – and it's the same thing with other people making up our mind for us as to where we as black people should fit into their lives. And most of them see it in a subordinate type way. Not as easily but as something less than them. And unless we have some type of major league constructive effort, something that's going to get into our

psyche and make us change, it's not going to happen. We have situations that are really shameful, going on right now, today, which is the results of our foolishness and mishandling based on race rather than reality. So let me give you this example if I may. When we were all wrapped up in alternatives to public education, a contracting firm was hired to provide the education, and we used Feitshans-Edison as part of the experiment to see how this was going to work. Well, they did not have the students to go to Feitshans-Edison all coming on board new, so the board went out to the principal for whatever grade that they were going to have at that school initially, that Feitshans-Edison needed some students to start this program of contractual education. And principals were advised to ask parents if they'd like to have their children attend this experimental school, and it was shown that certain kids did a lot better at these experimental schools than they did in regular public education schools. Well, they asked the parents but they didn't ask the parents equally. They asked the parents of the worst performing students (laughs) and they thought it would be a good chance for those students to get out of having what they had to go through at this home school and attend Feitshans-Edison. So actually, Feitshans-Edison was loaded down proportionately with lower performing students. And yet, when they came on board, we expect for them to produce high performing students in one grand leap. And it just didn't happen and the school didn't happen. Feitshans-Edison is still having a very rough time doing what they have to do to educate those children. But

they're doing a heroic job of it. They're doing better than what I would expect people to do under those circumstances.

Allen: What do you think about a (unintelligible) – Freshmen going to universities have to spend a year catching up before they can be selected.

Davenport: Remedial work, all of this is going on. But basically – I don't have that much knowledge of the upper-end college track. That's not my thing. But the lower end is where my answers are. To give them an example, Head Start is an excellent program. We know that poor families, the economically deprived, the economically disadvantaged families, they send their children to Head Start, they get nutritious food, they get good activities and they get __(??) so no matter where they start out, age one, age two, by the time they get to kindergarten – and they've been tested, black students are at an even level with their white counterparts. So no matter what handicap they started out with at home, participation in Head Start has brought them up to a level where they are equal. And then they start in Kindergarten, they remain for maybe the first couple of years of it. And then after maybe three years, the white students start pulling away, start doing a little bit better here and little bit better there, so by the time they finish elementary school, the white students are a full year ahead of the black. And then at the high school level the gap becomes even larger.

Allen: (unintelligible).

Davenport: So it starts early, we do know what to do. We know what to do. And it's just to put those resources in that need to be put in. And as we say, we can't do it without the public. Public education is not going to work without the public. And right now we have even politicians, that know better, bad mouthing public schools to a large extent. And certainly not voting for the money that they need.

Allen: Now your grandchildren, are they in public schools?

Davenport: All three are in public schools. And the schools are very well and it gives me a chance to go inside the schools to see how people are performing, and those people are performing as I said, heroically, under conditions without the support that the public actually should be giving them. Now we will spend money, it seems, people want to protect their own interests. People that drive want to protect the roads. I read in the paper the other day, this person wants to protect property and other things, but who will protect the children?

Allen: (unintelligible) because we don't have – we really don't have some of the parents and the parents are so needed. (unintelligible) The reason you'd go to a black school, I didn't know, because we were up north – (unintelligible).

Davenport: My folks didn't send me to college. I didn't go to college until I had been in the military and came out of the military to go. They could not have

afforded to send me to college. And at that time, we thought that high school was sufficient anyways. You completed high school, you went out to work. And you had a job like everyone else had a job, you had a high school education which meant you were at least literate and able to do enough literate things. Our particular thing was just straight racism. We couldn't get jobs as streetcar drivers or things that even a high school education would have qualified us for. We had a high school diploma, but still unable to get the job.

Allen: You were qualified to (unintelligible).

Davenport: (laughs) I thought of it, yes.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

Interview #2: April 1, 2004

Davenport: Good morning Bettie, how are you? I hope things are going well. This is Rudy Davenport, and we're back to continue.

Allen: This is Bettie Allen, continuing my interview with Rudy Davenport, and the date is April 1st, 2004.

Davenport: And good morning Bettie, it's good to see you again, and I guess we're back to continue. Let's see – what was it that we were doing with regard to my interview?

(break in tape)

Allen: Testing. This is Bettie Allen interviewing Rudy Davenport, on April 1st, 2004.

Davenport: Good morning, Bettie, this is Rudy Davenport and it's a pleasure to be back with you and hope things go well.

Allen: Okay.

Davenport: Well I think that we may want to pick up where we left off on our last interview. I'm thinking of something that – not necessarily interesting to a lot of people, but certainly interesting to me, being in Springfield, and of course a part in of it had to do with my personal life, marrying – some people would say rather late in life when you marry at seventy or sixty-nine or so, but I did marry in 1998, which put me just about at seventy. But I'm very happily married and I've adopted three children since that time. So it's a very good time in my life.

Allen: And your children, what are their ages today?

Davenport: Well their ages today, the oldest is [please provide her name here] – [she] just made thirteen yesterday, March 31st so she's a teenager, and that's an

experience. The next one in line is another girl, Rayhab(??), and Rayhab(??) is eleven years old, and she attends Du Bois School . She will be eleven in July. And the little boy, Jonah, is at Iles, and he's eight years old. So they're still pretty small, but we've had some…She's thirteen, and she was in kindergarten when we got her, so it's about eight years. Yes, it's about eight years.

Allen: So Jonah (unintelligible).

Davenport: Yes, yes. He was an infant when we got him, yes.

Allen: One of the things that we probably need to spend some time on, is that you have been in the NAACP and you have served in many capacities. Would you like to share that with us?

Davenport: Yes, sure. I was in the NAACP. Really came in when Agnes Houston was president, and that had to be maybe about twenty-five years ago, I would think. But I served only peripherally as a member, paying my dues, and more or less other people took care of the actions and the other things with regard to the NAACP. I was elected to the executive committee in… it must have been about 1994. And from the executive committee I became president, and I served four years as president in the nineties, and then stepped down and became vice-president, because I wanted to work in the "Back to School, Stay in School" program, I'm very interested in education. And we had a young man come on board that was very good,

Carl Madison, and we wanted to make sure that he had an opportunity for leadership in the organization, so Carl served four years, and right at four years, I found out that he had to transfer to Ohio because his job moved. I happened to be a vice-president at the time, and really that's how I got to be president. So I'm completing a term as interim president, that I got to by being the vice-president, that will be out in December 31st, of this year, 2004. So we're always looking for younger and stronger people to come on board, because one thing about all of us as we get older, we start looking around for our replacement. And that's the way life is and hope we can find those replacements that are going to be the very best for the organization.

Allen: Talking about strong leadership, you certainly were in touch with two very strong leaders. One was Mrs. Houston, and other was Mr. Madison. Would you care to elaborate on the different styles of leadership?

Davenport: All of us have a different style of leadership and if you don't believe it, just talk to my executive committee sometime. (laughs) They are forever reminding me when I do something calling for some leadership in the organization. Perhaps what someone else did before, and what happened, and how this was handled by someone else? Each leader has a different style, and each leader has different main objectives that they want to see achieved by the organization. It's not so much the history of the organization that get our interests and take up our time, as it is the future.

As a president, we're always looking to the future, looking to the here and now and what's going to result in the future, based on what we do in the here and now. But we really don't have a lot of time for reflection or even comparing with other leaderships that we've had. Both were very good leaders, I might add. Both were dedicated to the organization and that's what counts. They both brought some very strong attributes to their leadership, things that I really, frankly, cannot duplicate. It's not whether I want to do it or not, it's just that they have certain God-given talents with regard to leadership that they were able to carry out. And they were two different individuals, that is Carl Madison and Agnes Houston, and I'm different also.

Allen: Yes. One of the things that I think is interesting to see in those persons is that they were from different generations. And I think that makes a difference in how the program goes. (intelligible)

Davenport: Well I like to think that I can, as long as I – at least through December 31st of this year. It really is a matter of mindset. If you are forever looking back to what we used to do and how we did it then, and we find ourselves faced with different problems today, in the NAACP. And these call for a different solution. This is not only characteristic of the Springfield NAACP, this is throughout our national organization. We're always evolving and always changing to meet new challenges. And this calls for

change. And a lot of us at this place, think change is a little uncomfortable at times, and change is difficult, but change we must.

Allen: I remember you were distributing a book about a young man who had become a doctor. Would you like to speak a little bit about that? Because I think this is the gentleman that –

Davenport: Yes, his name was Ben Carson I believe.

Allen: And I think he was involved in, more recently, the twins that were attached to each other…

Davenport: Yes. Ben Carson is an eminent pediatric surgeon. In fact, he's one of the leading figures in that field, simply because he worked under very adverse conditions, Africa, and other places where their medical facilities did not compare with ours, yet he was able to do miraculous work with regard to separating Siamese twins. And because of that, he came and started working in the US and had a reputation as being very good. So others called on him, worldwide now, not just the African community where he found a great deal of satisfaction in doing that work, but he's in such demand now, that everyone that has a very difficult case will call on Dr. Ben Carson to perform the surgery. (unintelligible) it was brain surgery. You can well-imagine how intricate and complex it is if you have Siamese twins, two twins involved in that surgery. And the survival rate is less than fifty percent. It's a very low survival rate, but Doctor Ben was able to at

least bring that survival rate to over fifty percent of the ones that he worked on. And this is just outstanding.

Allen: I was thinking of that distribution of the book, it was one of your programs in the NAACP.

Davenport: Yes, yes. I read the life of Doctor Ben, (laughs) and after reading his life, I was so influenced by what he had done with his life that I wanted everyone to share his story. Here he is, raised by a single parent, he and his brother, his mother doing maid service in Detroit, in the inner city. She'd park him in the library just to have him off the street and safe from gang violence, and drugs, and all of the bad things that happened to our youth. And she was able to raise two sons and one of those sons was Dr. Carson. And that doesn't mean that Dr. Carson did not have experiences with bad influences in the city, he had some, just like any other youth. But he had a mother that would not take no for an answer from the school district that he went to in elementary school, because they were going to track him in low performance things, because he really was a bright individual, and because he was, a lot of times, they misdiagnosed him as being either mentally retarded or something wrong with him, and they were going to place him in a track which really would have hampered his education and deterred him for life. But his mom knew that she had a boy that was different, but yet one that was very occupied with learning. He would spend hours at the library learning on everything he could. He

happened to be – in high school, he did so well with his academic work he got a scholarship to college. As they say, the rest is history. (laughs) Went on to medical school and all.

Allen: How did you distribute that book? Where?

Davenport: Well, we got a grant from the city, under their (??) program, it's a program that the city has some money for community based organizations, and under our "Back to School Stay in School" program, we qualified, we're a 501(c)(3) program, so we qualified. We made an application to the city, and they gave us about $7,000. That's what the application is for. So we got them as paperbacks, and we got them at a discount through the publisher through Barnes and Noble, the distributor here, and the publisher gave us a nice discount so we were able to get them quite reasonably, and paperback. We wanted to have as wide a distribution as possible. We wanted to make sure that those students and families that had found themselves in situations like Dr. Carson, and see the light, that's in a situation like that.

Allen: And did you take them to the schools?

Davenport: Yes, we took them basically through our "Back to School Stay in School" program used the schools to distribute, and also used our contacts that we had with people in various social agencies. We wanted to make sure that they got to people that were having difficulties with their families and

difficulties with the school. In other words, we wanted to get to the ones that we thought would do the most good. Some agencies like Contact Ministries, Urban League, and others, wherever we could. I think we distributed over 1,100 of those, so that was very good.

Allen: What other programs like that are –

Davenport: Well, under our "Back to School" programs – we have an ongoing line of trying to help children in school. Our mission is to see that every child, at least for the __(??), in doing that, we have our brochures that we distributed in all of the schools. We have people that are meeting with the guidance deans of the schools. I had left the presidency about five years ago to take over that program, the "Back to School Stay in School" program, because I'm quite interested in education, and that was the time that – in fact, I was the one that started the program in Springfield. They had it nationwide, but they didn't have it in Springfield. And I could just see so much of what my children were going through in school, that the black children were having a great deal of difficulty. It's one of those things that you don't see that it's real until you see the results of how it comes out, and what they call an achievement gap, where white students are doing much better academically than black students. So this leads us to the next thing, well, what is wrong, and what is it we can do to help. If you want people to serve as mentors and tutors, you've got to do it first yourself. So we did the "Back to School Stay in School" attack. Because I

am the president and it just takes up so much time, I just brought on a director for that program, she is going to be taking and doing some things with it. So it looks like it's going to be in for the long haul in Springfield, and hopefully these are cases – difficult cases – but they're not impossible cases.

Allen: Very good. Now back to education----

Davenport: Yes, that's my favorite, Bettie, I know that civil rights are important, civil rights are very important. But I'm making it a point now at my age and what I do – I'm not doing jobs that I either see other people doing, or maybe other people show an interest in doing. I'll gladly move aside and move out of the way, because there's so much to be done, and so few people working at those things, so it's a lot to be done.

Allen: What is the current membership of the NAACP?

Davenport: It's about 320 now in Springfield. We've been level at that, the last four or five years, or a little longer than that. I'd say maybe the last ten years, it's been right about at 300, up to 320, up to 350 then. And you have turnover and people come and go. But usually about 300. We do have a membership drive at a peak if we really work at it, and get our material out of it and have people going out to maybe some of the churches, and have them talk to the leadership of the churches, and have them have an NAACP day, or NAACP presentation that we give.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: Well, I wish I could give you a good report on that. Registration, we've never had a problem in registration. It's execution, it's in the execution. So we can have people go out, we had them out at department stores, and other places, and registering voters and get them on the rolls, however, that does not translate into more votes in the ballot box, and that, I think is where the real lack of execution is. Now, how do we do that? Personally, I think we just need good old fashion follow-through. That means, you are going to do this type of work, we need to not only register people, but we need to follow up with them as to what their needs are and where they are on election day and what do they need to do to get to the polls.

Allen: What is the response of the black person who continually points to voting, there was a time… (unintelligible)…religious right…(unintelligible, both speaking).

Davenport: Sure, and I think that – one of the things that – we're a small town compared to say, Chicago and some other places where people can register, vote and no repercussions will be taken against them. Springfield is the type of place where almost anyone who wants to know what you're doing, can find out, and they will find out. And I think that some of that reluctance is in the church. You know, church members, are people with jobs, with other things, but sometimes they have a fear that if they do move out and take some type of leadership action with regard to voting or

any other civil rights activity, then there will be repercussions. I can understand it, on one hand, and yet I'm disappointed. But it does happen, and I know that it still happens, because we just don't have the numbers. I think we used to have – it came up with ministers just having influence in the community, political influence, and that was the case, because people look for that – we've mentioned that endorsement, and now, we do not have that anymore, because people running for office, all of the money that they raise they do not have any leftover, for ministers, or for precinct committee men, or for anyone else in the neighborhood. Because neighborhood people in politics now, the workers, really don't have any – there's none left, when it comes in, because the other media is so expensive.

Allen: TV.

Davenport: TV, especially TV. Before there was no TV and very little advertising, so people had to depend on that personal contact with ministers and precinct committee men to influence the voters. And it's not that people are not spending the money, they're spending it, running for elective office, but they're just spending it differently. And as a result the black community doesn't get any of it, the way that they used to get it.

Allen: I worked at the polls, and it was hard for one precinct committee person, did whatever money for three… (unintelligible).

Davenport: Yes. They either do not – they don't get the money, that's why they don't spend it, because as I said, the media's just taking up all of that money.

Allen: All right. So are you going to have to recruit people to work at – particularly look at ___(??) (unintelligible).

Davenport: We always – always – have had to do things ourselves. If you look at the major milestones in black improvements in the United States, it has always been initiated by people doing the extra things, going the extra mile, and independent of what they were paid, or whether someone supported them, and all of these other things. And it's the same way with us today. You really have to look at it, how bad do we really want our black children to have a quality education? Do we want it bad enough to see that the school board does what they're supposed to do, that the people who allocate the funds statewide do what they're supposed to do? Do we really want to give our children that priority that's called for by having our elected officials do what they're supposed to do?

Allen: I think that that is a good question and I ask myself. For the last fifty years you've had to do the work so who has done it(??)?(unintelligible)

Davenport: Yes, there's always going to be leaders. They see a situation, they can tolerate it no longer, they talk to another person about it, and that other person they talk, to cannot tolerate it any longer, and then it always starts

with, “Well let’s – “ and then we go from there. “Unity for the Community” seems to have that.

Allen: Yes, and the tenacity.

Davenport: Yes, and then the tenacity. It seems that there’s a lot of people in the room in the meetings that I was attending early on, that came there – and not only the number of people, but they came there with the purpose of linking up with something that’s finally going to get at some of their grievances.

Allen: Or a show of numbers…

Davenport: They’re safe.

Allen: (unintelligible)

Davenport: Yes, and all of the people over there understood the importance of them being there, so that the numbers would be increased. They did not take it upon themselves to send someone else or to do this. Now, can those numbers be maintained? Only if they’re going to go into something where there’s sufficient interest in the community to do something about it, to make change. And it will be quite interesting to see how we understand that change is necessary in the city of Springfield, if we want to see that justice and equality exist, otherwise we’re going to have continuances of, well, use the Renatta Frazier case. And that particular case, I think, has

brought some people to meetings of "Unity for the Community." People are definitely interested in mistreatment of individuals.

Allen: Yes, and I was surprised that the whites who had similar grievances.

Davenport: Mm-hmm. Or, they sympathize with our grievance, which happened in our civil rights, Dr. Martin Luther King. They had white people that died, that sympathized with the black people and what they were going through. There's a lot of people that just cannot stand injustice. And so I think that that type, if we keep reminding ourselves of the cause of that case, you know, how it came into being and are the underlying causes still in place, then that means that you have a job to do. They might have settled with the lawsuit, but the underlying causes are still there.

Allen: I think the one thing that is good about Unity is you don't have to depend upon you alone (??) it's extended all around the community and throughout the community that comes in from the committee about what they're doing and they know who the doers are. (unintelligible).

Davenport: Yes. Things that happen to us in life, you can go either way with them. You can use it as a blessing or a curse. That's true. Sometimes we get these aches and pains and we look up and we say, "Oh Lord, why me?" but maybe the Lord is trying to tell us something, and help us to just maintain our health a little bit better, do something; that we're maybe doing [something] that we need to stop doing –

Allen: (unintelligible).

Davenport: Yes, and so we can't claim it's all bad, even if it does nothing but bring us closer to him, it's good. So we can look at that "Unity in the Community" and that experience. I haven't talked to anyone who wants to go through that again what they did as far as the partisan election and the primaries. But I still think the interest is there for voter registration and voter participation. And I think that somewhere, a lot of us want to put all of that together. We still have that dream of being politically astute and having to political savvy to organize ourselves, and then we can influence others.

(pause)

Allen: (unintelligible) Rudy, what do you expect in the future?

Davenport: (laughs) There's an old black spiritual saying, "I'm afield on the battlefield." (laughs) And it says, "I'm afield on the battlefield for my Lord," but for me, it's, "I'm afield on the battlefield" until America's problems come to reality for all of its citizens, especially those of color. Too long have we denied people their promised rights, that were promised in the Declaration of Independence, when this country was founded, that we'd have certain inalienable rights. For a long time, those rights have been denied. They were denied – America's had a chance at reform. It's not that we have not had chances. And we could have reformed it July 4,

1776 when we declared our independence. We also should have declared our independence from slavery. That would have helped. But we did not. We didn't have the will to do it at that time. And we were controlled by the plantation owners of the south, who again, had their way, because it was vital, I guess, for us to have their support in the Revolutionary War. But after that, even when we split in a brutal and bloody civil war where the lines were very well defined and well drawn, and promises were made. Well, the promises were made and certain things did follow. Reconstruction was a factor. We got black colleges established as a result, and some educational things going. And that lasted maybe about twelve years, until the honeymoon was over. (Laughs). And again, those in the south found that they could use their political power to gain what they wanted to gain, which was dominance over the black people of the south. And they used that power, and they used that power to elect Presidents that would pull the federal troops out of the south, and actually turn the south over to the state black laws at the time. So they were able to get in to legalized segregation, and legalized discrimination and all of the bad things that happened to black people in this country. So it moved on up into the twentieth century, and I call it the century of lynching because in the first part of the century we probably had more lynching and race riots, similar to the one we had in Springfield, and similar to what occurred and founded the NAACP that – it's just been a terrible nightmare for black people in America. And even through the civil rights era, when the

promise of civil rights became a reality, and things really did open up, like they were going to live up to the promise of America – civil rights laws were passed and certain things followed. But then it was not long before reactionary forces set in to rob black people of those gains, because without economic progress there's no way you can protect the other things that you have in America, unless you're keeping up economically. So at this time, you have to look at the future, and wonder what it portends for America. And I think that – when I say America, I'm thinking of America in general and Springfield specifically.

[End of Tape 2 Side A]

[Start of Tape 2 Side B]

Davenport: I think that one of the things we have to look at in the future is, how do we address the overwhelming problem of the prison population? Here we are, instead of educating black, young Americans with things that would be progressive and where they can have jobs and raise their families and live the American dream, here we are incarcerating at record levels. And that includes the city of Springfield. We do not have enough space at our county jail to even take care of people because of the crime that's being committed. And most of this, not a lot, but most of it has its roots in the discrimination and the lack of economic jobs and education, and where we put ourselves. And when I say that, I mean we put ourselves, both black and white, in a predicament that we are finding that's intolerable for both.

Black people, we put ourselves in that position, because for too long we have tolerated just enough to get by. Just enough to keep us alive another day, without really getting to what we need. And we were satisfied with what we got, instead of getting what we need, for the viability of our children, and for the future. As I said, a lot of it has its roots in slavery, obviously, we are a product of our history, and a lot of it is in our favor(??) and our years of discrimination and being denied. I mean, we've had just because the Supreme Court makes a statement in the 1850s, that a black person has no right, that a white person needs respect. When this is the law of the land, and I mean, this was the law of the land for 100 years, that you could not file a claim in court on land, unless someone gave you permission to do it. Locally. And so this makes it very, very difficult for a lot of people to understand that you just can't say, "Well, you're equal now," and, "Well, you ought to make something of yourself." Well, you can't do it. You can't do it because you do not have the etrament(??) of equality.

Allen: That's great. I guess (intelligible).

Davenport: Yes, it really does. It's at its worst in the last half of the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th Century. We saw America at its worst, I'd say. And we are seeing now, with the rate of incarceration, and what's going on, even in our county jail, that we should be ashamed of ourselves. And by that, I mean no one should be incarcerated without the availability to

legal counsel. And by that, I mean we owe it to whomever it is that's incarcerated to provide that legal counsel. And that legal counsel should be just as good as any other legal counsel. And I think we're having some churches now, that are recognizing racism is a sin, and they're asking their members to do something to rid the country, or the area, of this racism, or sin. And a lot of it comes down to just plain fairness. If you're going to bring somebody up, if you're going to make them bold, are you going to have to share what you have with them? Black people, on the other hand, if they want their equality, they will do anything for it. They are going to be called to do anything for it. They're going to have to be smarter, they're going to have to have more – certainly going to have to have more political discipline than anyone else. They're going to have to have more monetary discipline than anyone else, because they have so much catching up to do. And when previous wealth continues to earn interest, it's very difficult to bring that about. There has to come a reparations movement of some type, I think, in our community, and in America.

Allen: Did you see (unintelligible)?

Davenport: No, I didn't see it but I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised because --

Allen: No, they're free(??).

Davenport: Yes, I think that certainly, in the NAACP, we have certain cases that we have filed for some type of reparations that's due. These cases really are

won against insurance companies who discriminated in the policies which they sold in the 19th Century, and this discrimination caused black people to pay a disproportionably higher premium than white people for the same insurance policy.

Allen: (unintelligible).

Davenport: Yes, right they –

Allen: Did you have any personal experience…

Davenport: No, my wife, my first wife did. My first wife did, and they sent out a settlement that they were getting. They were trying to settle those where they can. So there are some movements, but it's very slow. What we really need – we need to free ourselves of the shackles of the dominant chairmen in the Congress from the south, who dominate the committee. We have Congressman Conyers from Michigan, each year tries to introduce a bill and gets debate on reparations. And they will never let it out of committee. The country cannot have a free and open discussion on this very important matter. We do need it at a national level. And until we get it, we're going to keep passing appropriations and more money to build more prisons.

Allen: What do you think about Bishop Tutu's reconciliation idea, in regards to reparations?

Davenport: They're very much the same, and I think that the only thing that is different is the approach. We try, the approach for ours is through Congress. We're trying to get it on the books as a law. His approach, and I've seen that through spiritual – he's a spiritual leader, and he's using his leadership to move those things through the spiritual aspects of our society, and the world. He's trying to bring us to see, that we cannot live in this dichotomy of one white doing well, satisfied, and one black doing poorly and never can be satisfied.

Allen: Do you think there's a new type of slavery – new slaves of this country that is not black(??)?

Davenport: There is nothing like slavery that I have seen by people of color, even that are not black. Even the Native Americans did not experience the slavery that blacks had experienced. Were the Native Americans treated poorly? Certainly they were.

Allen: I think they were, yes.

Davenport: Certainly they were treated poorly.

Allen: Exterminated them.

Davenport: Exterminated them, moved them off their land, sent them to Oklahoma, they died, in the Trail of Tears. There is nothing quite as sad as the day of slavery. I'm not saying that other people did not have terrible experiences

at the hands of the dominant white race in America, yes it's terrible. And it still happens. But at least they had some of their own treaties opened where they could go into court and they had certain lands, that they were able to build casinos and other entrepreneurial things on to try to make up for some of the things. Now, it can never be made up, but I'm just saying the door actually opened for them a little bit broader than it has for black people, I think.

Allen: (unintelligible).

Davenport: Yes.

Allen: I mean, the Indians that –

Davenport: Yes, it was very concrete –

Allen: And this is the whole thing, it's the whole pride and they did whatever they wanted.

Davenport: Yes, they did. So it's terrible on both ends. I'm not denying it. My question that I want to bring up and talk about are never against other people of color. Because they are all suffering. But it's just that I want to understand that there's nothing quite like the suffering of black people in America. That experience of black people in America is really unknown in history. You don't have anything like it.

Allen: You don't compare the (unintelligible).

Davenport: Never like that, never like that. Slaves could always work themselves into some type of independence. Slaves could always leave through military service, if nothing else. Some measure of equality. It's certainly a freedom. In fact, if you look back in history in other places, race is never a matter for slavery. Generally in other countries it was usually prisoners that they would take, when they captured something, or someone that they overwhelmed in battle that they made slaves of. Now, these people might be people of color, or they might be people looking just like they looked. In America, this is different, because race – race is a pretty important thing, and it's still a pretty important thing.

Allen: I see your point, I'm not disagreeing with your point. It's just (unintelligible) It's just been a bad –

Davenport: It's been a bad thing. It is, and it's still bad, Bettie. That's why I said the future does not look bright because we haven't made it to look bright. It's a very sad picture. So even when we have our annual banquet, our annual meeting, there's no reason for us to be celebrating, really, the way that we should be celebrating. We're celebrating for victory, and in fact this is the fiftieth year for *Brown v The Board of Education*.

Allen: That's what's critical about the reports in the papers(??) in the past few weeks. You can't celebrate.

Davenport: Right, no you can't. And in fact, the national association, the Illinois national association had me write an article on it, and that was the very thing. We can't celebrate, because too many things can be documented that we have really failed in the dream of *Brown v Board of Education*. So, again, racism is so ingrained in America –

Allen: They don't know that they're even –

Davenport: Yes, they don't know, they don't (unintelligible; both speaking)

Allen: They're mad at you because –

Davenport: If you bring it up, and say, now, wait a minute, the problem with racism, we have to have an accounting and a settlement. That accounting and a settlement means that you're going to have to spend more per pupil on educating black children because they need it more. That's what it comes down to. Because you robbed their forefathers in the beginning, and they want their money now. They need it.

Allen: "I didn't do it." (laughs)

Davenport: (laughs) That's right. Others. No, they didn't do it, but they don't mind using the wealth that was built up by others. No, it's a matter of – and really, they're not the only ones to blame. We black people have not taken our work seriously. I blame myself first, Rudy Davenport. I'm first

and foremost standing in the dark, confessing that I really could have done a lot more, and I now I see it.

Allen: So –

Davenport: I think the future is, again, a lot of work, to be better. When I say I'm standing in the dark, guilty, it's not on the minor level, like on the level of just what it's going to take to get the job done that we want to get done. We have to be willing to live a moderate life, really. You've only got one life to live, and when you compare it to eternity it's just a little dot at best. (laughs)

Allen: I was blown away when I read that article in the paper about the old (unintelligible).

Davenport: Oh, yes.

Allen: Bernie, Bernie Estridge(??).

Davenport: Bernie Estridge(??) yes,

Allen: I know he never had much of a job and so you (unintelligible).

Davenport: (laughs) Yes.

Allen: (unintelligible).

Davenport: Well anyway, yes.

Allen: (unintelligible).

Davenport: Yes, a moderate life, yes. A sacrificial life. It's well to live well, but it's even better to live responsibly. And I try to teach my grandchildren that, because we all like to live well, and it's really – if you live responsibly, you will be living well.

Allen: Give back to the citizens. Use the ability God was able to give us to improve.

Davenport: Sure. Living responsibly. And that also means responsibly for your brothers and sisters. We can't always point our fingers to those people who don't go to the polls and those people that don't do this. I'll keep doing what I'm doing, hopefully, staying on the battlefield, petitioning my government, petitioning my school board, and petitioning other people that have the future, have our future in their hands. And asking my brothers and sisters to join us. Whatever the future holds, whatever challenges. And you cannot live without looking at the storm clouds gathering overhead. If you think that we can keep building prisons, and keep going on this road to incarceration indefinitely, it's not going to happen. If you think that we can still allow our youth and our population to be devoured by cocaine and other influences that we have allowed into our communities to come prey on those that are in it. I learned a long time ago, follow the money trail. You follow the money trail, you'll get to who the real enemy is. And they say, well, if people don't consume, then they

won't be producing it. Well, that's always true, but yet when you get disabled people, and we are mentally disabled because of what we went through, and if we were not disabled we wouldn't be prey to those types of things. We wouldn't allow people to use us as some type of consumer machines for every evil thing that's ever come down the pike. So we have some responsibilities, but first of all, we share the responsibility to know that we cannot continue to do what we're doing. We've got to do something to help ourselves.

Allen: Thank you.

Davenport: Yes, with that I'll close, Bettie.

Allen: Oh, okay. Thank you very much.

Davenport: Yes, you're welcome.

[End of interview]