

Interview with Mrs. Johnnie Carr - September 7, 2002

Mrs. Johnnie Carr

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, September 7, 2002

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Mrs. Johnny Carr: First of all I would like to say to Rev. Wills, who is the person who contacted me to tell me about this meeting this afternoon. What you all are about, I'm not quite certain that I know all of what you're about, but knowing about history and historians and the thing that they do when they're gonna make history stories about different events and things, I'm sure that that would be a part of what it's all about. Plus the fact that we had the privilege this evening of seeing one of my, one of my outstanding persons in my life, and that is Attorney Fred Gray. And to the rest of you who are here, I would like to say "Good Evening" and hopefully that Montgomery's going to give you something that you would like to have in what you're doing, wherever you are.

To tell you a little bit about myself, I'm a native Montgomerian. I was born and bred a matter of about 20 miles from where we are this afternoon, and I have lived here all my life. And I feel that the Lord has been very gracious to me, he has blessed me wonderfully. And I am very thankful for the opportunity and the privilege that he has afforded me, to have the privilege of being able to have said this in the presence of this person, that this might have been the tenth or more times that Attorney Fred Gray and I have been together on such occasions, and it has always been a joy for me to be with him, 'cause he has always been a person that I could regard. And I am not saying this because he is here, if he were somewhere else, I would say the same thing (*laughter*). Because he is a wonderful person because the things that he has done—when I learned of him, I didn't know him all of his life, but when I met him and the things that he has done for *people*—and a lot of people would say for my people, but when I say for *people*, because he didn't just do it for my people, he did it for people. Because he has done a marvelous job in his work and bringing about the, what we would call equal rights for people and that is something that we have been struggling with.

He was, he was a lawyer for Dr. King and Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks and I were students together in a private school here in Montgomery, AL that was organized by white teachers who came down from the north and organized a school for black girls here in the '80s, in the 1800s. And operated that school until 1927. And Rosa Parks had the opportunity, and I, and attended that school, and we were classmates in that particular school. I feel that that school really gave the girls that had the opportunity to attend that school a background that many others may not have had because of the fact that the persons who were operating the school they went to tremendous things to operate a school at that time in this community. If you can believe me when I tell you, they were not accepted by the white citizens at all. They had to worship at black churches and whatever. But their purpose was to give to black girls an opportunity to have an education that they felt that they needed. And we are grateful, Rosa and I both are grateful that the opportunity, that our parents took the opportunity, the advantage of sending us to this particular school. We were in the grades. The school closed in 1927 because of illness of the principle, Ms. White. She could not carry on and she had to finally give up the school. And that was when Rosa Parks and I parted. And we did not see each other from 1927, I would guess, until the late '30s or early '40s. But we went our separate ways, I got married and had a family and I guess that she got married, but we didn't see each other.

And, of course, in my way, in my community, I had a very stern mother. When I say stern, I mean she was very strict with her children. My father died when I was nine and she had four children to finish rearing after his death. And she did it, and I think she did a pretty good job of it because we all grew up to be grown family people and whatever. And God has blessed me with opportunities to have taken advantage of things that were given to me at that particular time, which I am grateful for.

When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the city line bus in Montgomery on December 1, 1955—from that day until now, when we found that it was feasible of the things that went on with Dr. King, Mr. E.D. Nixon, being the person in the community who was made aware of her arrest by a person who was on the bus as she went to notify Dr. King that her friend, his friend had been arrested. She did not see him but she gave the word, and when he got the word, he attempted to find out about her arrest. And they would not give him any information. At that time, as I understand it, Attorney Fred Gray was not in the city, but he was on his way back to the city, I think, but he was not here. And an intern, Mr. Nixon, got in touch with a lawyer, white lawyer, who was the only at that time we had here that would really take cases of abuse and whatever by the blacks. And Mr. Tiffeder, Mr. E.D. Nixon and Mrs. Derr went down to the city jail to see about Rosa, because when Mr. Nixon asked for information, they wouldn't give him none. The caller asked about it and of course he got the information. And they went down to get her out of jail, and from that moment on that ball started rolling, and that ball is still rolling.

Because I've had many people that ask this question to me, and I was just asked a few days ago about a newspaper (indistinct) about 9-11 that we will celebrate next week, that this was a wake-up call, and my answer is this: it might have awakened to some people, but some people are still asleep, because they are carrying on the same type of activity that they were carrying on, denying and refusing to do things for people and accepting things that they shouldn't. So I feel we have had a long, long struggle, because from 1955 to the day that we have been out on the battlefield trying to correct the wrongs that had been heaped upon the heads and the lives of our people. But we do feel that in large way that we have accomplished some things, but it could not have been accomplished had we not have had a Martin Luther King, a Rosa Parks, a E.D. Nixon, a Fred Gray and many others who went to the forefront and gave their all and all to try to break down the laws that were keeping us from enjoying life as other people. So that is really the headlines of the story to begin with, because went from the bus—of which it was the beginning of Rosa not giving up her seat—and we went from the bus to every other phrase of segregation that we could go for. I have heard Attorney Gray say that when he was in law school, he said that when he came back, he was gonna try to break down everything that was segregated. Now, I'm not quoting him as he quoted it, but that's what he meant, that he was gonna tear down all of the doors that were closed in the faces of our people. And I think, Attorney Gray, that you have done a great job. You have done a great job. And I know because having been there then and am still there now, and knowing what he has done. And when he was elected the state bar president, I couldn't go to the, up there, but I was singing and praying and thanking God for the privilege and opportunity that had been awarded him for his labor and his long struggle that he had done. 'Cause that was one door that he broke down, and he had gone into that door (*applause*) And I just read in the paper, (*applause continues*) I just read in the paper, I believe this week, where there is a black person who is a national figure in the bar—

Man: President Electman of the American Bar Association.

Mrs. Johnny Carr: Of the American Bar Association. So, I can see where things are moving forward. However, as I said a few minutes ago about not waking up, there are some people who are working as hard to push progress back as there are people who are working hard to move it forward. So, I'm happy to see a group of you who are trying to make history and to write history or whatever or to make it a fact so people will really know some of the things that went on. I have had the opportunity and privilege of going to a lot of places and speaking in a lot of areas to groups, and I especially do it to young people who come here on tours down to the Rosa Parks museum, out up in here to Dexter. Pastor Darman can tell you that they called me and asked me to come here to Dexter or Harbridge at Lawson or wherever they're gonna go, but I'll come here and tell them about how we came through the things that we had to do, and what we were working for and how we came about it. And one of the things that I tried to impress upon young people especially, that it is not by might, it is not by your, all that you know, but it is really by contact and your willing to listen to your peers and to your elders, and also by the grace of God that we have come a long way. Because we have gone through some things that I cannot recollect myself. Somebody'll bring it up and start talking about it, and I'll say, "Oh yes, I remember that." But some of the things that we were doing have gone away from us, we have passed over those things. And this evening we're able to realize that we do have investment in freedom and we can do some of the things that we would like to achieve. And one of the things that I know Fred Gray has done is he has continued in his profession and what he has done, it can never be written in books, it will never be all told, the things that he has done to help to bring about the things that we're now enjoying and the things that are rightfully ours as citizens of the United States of America.

I don't know if I can tell you anything else, other than to just tell you that I am just delighted that Rev. Wills called to tell me about this and if I'm not gonna be a person to say anything, I just like to be in the presence of people who is knowledgeable and who knows the things that has happened and who is going to help me to remember. For being the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association since 1967, but the doors are still open, we're still working. The organization is still intact and we're still doing the things that has to be done. So believe it or not, when we think about the election that we had for our president and all other things, we know that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in voter registration and voter education. And that is one of the things that we are very interested in and we are involved in at this particular time. So we hope that your venture and what you're doing, along with other things that's going on, is going to help push forward and help make it better for us in the future than it has been in the past.

Dr. King—just to say a word about him—I was happy that I had the opportunity and the privilege of *knowing* him and not just hearing about him. You read about some people in books, you hear about some people talking about, but to have had the church by his side, and to know Dr. King, and to know that he was real. He was not fictitious by anybody's vision, he was a real, real person and he was real to all of us. And I am happy to say that I am sitting now in a very, a very—I don't know what to name the place, but I would say it is a very special place, because this is where he spent much of his life, teaching in the pews here. And he was elected the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. I don't think anybody that knew about it would say anything

about Dr. King, but he was the person that we felt like he could lead. Because the type of leadership that he gave was not the type that had been advanced before. 'Cause most of the time you would retaliate, but Rev. King's philosophy was not to retaliate—not with guns and bullets and anger, but with love and nonviolence. And that's a key that I've believe opened the door and that helped us be successful. Thank you. (*applause, movie ends*)