



Interview with Alexander McAlister Rivera

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Durham (N.C.)

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Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University
Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life
in the Jim Crow South

Interview
with
Alexander McAlister Rivera, Jr.

June 2, 1995

Mary Herbert and Felicia Woods,
interviewers

Q: Would you please state your name and date of birth?

Rivera: Alexander McAlister Rivera, Jr. October 4, 1913.

Q: Where were you born?

Rivera: Born in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Q: Did you live there most of your life?

Rivera: No, I lived there until I left to go to college. I stayed there all my childhood, yeah.

Q: Do you remember when you began to go to school?

Rivera: Five or six. I don't know.

Q: And you went up until which grade in high school?

Rivera: I completed high school in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Q: Did they go up to grade--

Rivera: Twelve. We had twelve grades.

Q: How did you come to live in Durham [North Carolina]?

Rivera: Oh, well, I've lived off and on in Durham. My mother died when I was young. I was two years old when my mother died, and my grandparents lived in Durham, so I was immediately brought here until my father remarried. So I lived my real before-school life in Durham. Before I went to school at all, I lived here in Durham with my grandparents.

Then when I graduated from high school, I went to college at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and this was during the Depression. About my second year, my money ran out, so I started working with a newspaper, the *Washington Tribune* newspaper, and it was during this time that I got an offer from Dr. Shephard, Dr. James D. Shephard, who was the founder and first president of North Carolina Central; it was then North Carolina College. He offered me a scholarship if I would come and organize the news bureau here, and so I thought that would be a good opportunity for me to complete my education, so I

came. That was in 1939.

Q: How did you know Dr. Shephard? Did you know him?

Rivera: That's an interesting question. My father's a dentist; was a dentist. He's deceased now. And my father was Dr. Shephard's dentist. My father started practicing in Durham, North Carolina, and shortly after he started, he moved to Greensboro, changed. So Dr. Shephard used to come all the way from Durham to Greensboro to have his teeth worked on by my father. Of course, when I say "all the way," it was an all-day trip in those days from Durham to Greensboro.

So I got to know Dr. Shephard almost--today we would have been calling him Uncle Jim, but in those days you didn't take that license. He was an imperial-type man, anyway, and it would have been very difficult to get close enough to him to call him Uncle Jim. But we were just that close.

The interesting thing, as I said, to tell it all, my father was not pleased at all with the fact that I had dropped out of school in Washington, but he wasn't able at that time to do much about it, because I had two sisters, and they were in college. So they felt that I should work, because they were not in a position to work, and in those days you had no federal funds, no state funds. You made your money by working in the summer and going to school in the winter. So when the funds ran out, it was just out.

So Dr. Shephard and my father had a little conspiracy, and it was through their agreement that I was offered this position back here. The interesting thing about it was that he asked me to come in and organize--no, he told me he wanted me to head up the news bureau. When I came here, I found out they didn't have one. So I said, "I must have misunderstood you, because I thought that you wanted me to head this news bureau."

He said, "You didn't misunderstand me. I want you to organize one." So then I realized that all of this was a cooked-up scheme between my father and Dr. Shephard. So now you know it all. So that's how I got here.

Q: Was your father one of the few African American dentists in Greensboro?

Rivera: At that time he was the only.

Q: What about in the surrounding area? Was he the only one in the general vicinity of Greensboro?

Rivera: Yeah. Shortly after he started practicing, there came to Greensboro another dentist; Dr. Joy Simpkins [phonetic] came. But to start out, he was the first one, which meant that he treated people from--he asked the question from around, and all these people would come in, these farmers, who couldn't pay, would come in with produce and animals and eggs and everything

to pay for it. I remember that part of it, yeah.

Q: So they would barter for--

Rivera: Yeah, for dental work.

Q: You mentioned that your father cooked up this scheme with Dr. Shephard to get you back in school. Did he push your education the whole way through?

Rivera: No. We understood that we were to finish college. I mean, that was from almost birth; we understood that. There was never any question. But I had two sisters; I had one here and one at Fisk University in Tennessee, and so we were all in college, but this was a terrible time financially, the whole Depression. People like Vanderbilt were jumping out of windows, you know. I mean, it was terrible.

Q: How did the Depression affect the black community in--well, you were up in D.C. at the time, but here in North Carolina? Do you have any sense of that?

Rivera: Yeah, I have a sense of it. Blacks, fortunately, as far as the Depression was concerned, were easier to make it because they had less to lose. See, you didn't have--I just got through saying the Vanderbilts were jumping out the window

because they were millionaires. They were losing fortunes. Blacks didn't have a fortune to lose. They were rock bottom to start with, and they knew how to, what we call, to make do. You learn almost culturally, racially, you learned to make do with what you had. You didn't complain about it; you prayed for more and worked hard and that was about it.

Q: Let me ask you. You mentioned two sisters. Were there other family members in the home where you grew up?

Rivera: Nuh-uh.

Q: So the three of you and your dad?

Rivera: And Mama. See, my daddy remarried and so I had a stepmother, so that's when we moved back to Greensboro where he remarried. So I had a sister, she was one year old when my mother died, and a half-sister.

Q: What did your grandparents do? Your father was a dentist. Was he also a professional?

Rivera: You're getting into a whole lot not. My great-grandfather was the first black undertaker in the state of North Carolina, and he was in Wilmington, North Carolina. In 1898, they had the riot of Wilmington, the Wilmington Riot of 1898.

This was the beginning, or end, of Reconstruction. All over the country, not just in North Carolina, they were having these riots.

You see, after the Civil War, to embarrass and to punish the South, the victorious North turned over the cities, the administration of these cities, to blacks, so Wilmington was one of those that everything in the city was run by blacks. I mean, the judges and postmaster and everything was run by blacks. Well, it was doing just what the North wanted to do, was embarrassing them, so they decided, around 1898, that they'd been punished enough; the South had been punished enough. There was an election called the Haze Tilden election. You're familiar with that. Well, the Haze Tilden election, one of the agreements was, "This was over and we're not going to punish you any longer, and from now you take over."

So the South and these other places didn't want to take over gradually by voting; they wanted to take over right now, and the only way to do it was to riot. So those people who were in responsible positions, they were giving them a chance to leave. Those people who worked in menial jobs, in factories and so forth, a lot of them were killed, enough to let them know that their rule was over.

So my grandfather was an undertaker. He worked not with his father; he had an establishment of his own because he couldn't get along with his father. So he had a business by himself. When they had the riot of 1898, the Wilmington Riot of

1898, he was told to leave immediately.

Q: So he was warned to leave, rather than--

Rivera: Rather than killing him, he was told to leave. He didn't leave immediately. The first night, he stayed in the graveyard, the cemetery. Well, that was familiar territory to him, being an undertaker. He was home free. So, of course, he ran and spent the night in the cemetery.

The next day, of course, when things calmed down a little bit, he was ready to leave, so he left and he brought his family on to Durham.

Q: So he was married at the time?

Rivera: Oh, yeah, married, with grown children, just about grown children.

Q: Did the whole family have to leave?

Rivera: Oh, yeah. The whole family.

Q: Did he remain an undertaker when he got here?

Rivera: No. He tried to. He never got over the horse-carriage era. All of his big funerals in Wilmington were horse-drawn.

He just never could make the transition from horse-drawn to automobile. So he was a failure here. He just couldn't make the transition.

Q: Did your father--

Rivera: Well, he started and tried to here, but he just didn't do it. My father started working with him, as father and son.

Q: As undertakers?

Rivera: Yeah, but that started in Wilmington. They had an agreement. They had an agreement that there would be no whiskey left in the undertaking establishment at all. One day when my father went, there was a keg of whiskey there. I mean, he told his daddy, "I thought we agreed that there would be no whiskey." And he said, "I know we had an agreement, but don't you forget that I'm your father." So from there on, my father said, "I'm leaving. We are not going to be mutually respecting on the same level."

So then he left and went to Howard University to the ministry. That's how he got into it.

Q: What was the whiskey all about?

Rivera: It was just a keg, yeah. Somebody had come by there.

It was legal in those days. Somebody just, "Maybe I'll leave this here for safekeeping," or something, just left a keg of whiskey. Nothing illegal about it. But Father was against it, and he said they had this agreement when they went in the business, that they'd have no whiskey on the premises. See, in those days, when an undertaker--one of the biggest things he had to do, a lot of them made the caskets by hand. The undertaking establishments usually was a cabinet shop, and they did a whole lot of work on the caskets themselves. Back in that back area somewhere, somebody left this keg of whiskey that my father found.

So he left and went to Washington and went to Howard University. You've got the background, I guess.

Q: Yes. What was Durham like when you were here? Do you remember much of Durham when you were here as a child--the neighborhoods, those kinds of things, or do those memories come from your older years?

Rivera: Both.

Q: What was it like when you were, say, five years old?

Rivera: I don't remember that, but the impressionable stage for me was the big business success of Durham and it meant a type of living that I had never seen before because big homes,

chauffeurs, this type of thing, where they had, I mean, big cars, and where they had at least two of them. And in those days, women didn't drive automobiles; it was unladylike. They didn't smoke, either. So if you had a car for your wife, you had to have a chauffeur for her.

So this was--where I had been in Greensboro, where I had been before, I mean, this was not the case, but here, all these people here, the various businesses, and there were a lot of them around here, because the blacks had learned how to organize businesses. It seemed like every time they turned around, they were organizing another one, you know, and it was very successful because one would support the other. They had--I don't know how familiar you are, they had interlocking boards and they could have a board meeting of four or five businesses without opening the door, opening and closing the door; it was just changing seats at the table.

Q: So you mean several people owned several businesses as a corporation-type thing?

Rivera: They were all corporations, but the managerial, administration part of it was controlled by the same people. So if you had a meeting of one board, I'm saying, without opening the door, you could just change, "Now we're going to have a meeting of this other board." So then the chairman of that committee would move to the head of the table, but ostensibly

they'd be the same people.

Q: So the same people controlled most of the wealth within the city?

Rivera: Most of the businesses, yeah. There was never any great wealth. The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, by virtue of being a mutual company, its stockholders were people who owned the insurance policies, unlike a stock company.

A stock company, then you would have shares and you could get power, but there was no way to get rich. You made a lot of money and they lived on good salaries, and salaries were larger than other salaries around, white or black, but the one thing I think that saved them was the fact that these were not stock companies; they were mutual companies. Almost all of them were mutual companies.

It's just the opposite from a lot of other places. Atlanta Life Insurance Company was a stock company. North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company was a mutual company. I remember one day I was in Winston-Salem, and Mr. Spalding called me to come back here immediately. I was a newspaperman then. I said, "But I'm busy." He said, "Listen. Come back right now, because I'm in trouble."

So I got back over here, and a magazine had written him up as one of the ten richest black men in America. He said, "This is an indictment, because there's no way for me to be one of the

richest black men in the nation because I've been on salary ever since I've been here, and the only way for me to have been the richest is to have stole something." That's the reason why he wanted me to come back immediately and write this correction, rejection, or whatever.

Q: And you did that?

Rivera: Uh-huh.

Q: You mentioned newspaperman. Was that your first job?

Rivera: Yeah, of any consequence. See, when I went to Howard University, I was on the yearbook staff of my class, and I was writing for the class and taking pictures. A newspaper company was also our publishing company, so we'd carry our stuff down to this newspaper company and they were publishing the yearbook. They saw the material that I was bringing in, writing and pictures, and then when I gave out of money to go to school, they asked if I would like a job. I said, "Yeah, I need a job." That's how I started with the newspaper, the *Washington Tribune*.

I started out taking pictures and writing, one of the first, one of the early black photojournalists in the country.

Q: How did you get interested in photography?

Rivera: I don't know. Just part of it.

Q: When did you start taking pictures? Was it in Washington?

Rivera: Yeah, professionally. I mean, everybody was taking some snapshots of things, but professionally is when I started with the yearbook.

Q: Were you interested in a photojournalist career, like maybe in your teens or before then?

Rivera: Not that I remember. I would have no--of course, there was nothing available to me to suggest that that would be a career.

Q: What did you major in in college?

Rivera: History. The only reason, none of these schools had journalism at the time. They have some kind of creative writing or something over here now, but full-fledged journalism, they didn't have them because there was no outlet. There were no opportunities.

Q: Is there a black newspaper here in Durham?

Rivera: Yeah, the *Carolina Times*.

Q: You mentioned, before we started, that you got interested in civil rights in your teens.

Rivera: Yeah.

Q: In the thirties?

Rivera: This was the case here. In 1930, John J. Parker was nominated for the United States Supreme Court, and my father considered John J. Parker a racist, and he was determined to defeat him if he could. That was almost unheard of. It was even more difficult because the black leaders, especially those who were heads of educational institutions, felt it imperative that they support Parker, because they were afraid to go against him. So it meant that my father got that virtually by himself.

But Walter White was executive secretary of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], a friend of my father, and my father contacted him and told him that Parker should be defeated. He asked him would he work for him, and he said yeah. So they started working to defeat Parker, and it got real, real nasty. We had to string lights in our back yard for fear of my father's safety.

This is the time when Walter White and members of the NAACP

came to Greensboro to discuss this case, and I was in my teens.

There was no place for them to stay, no hotel or anything, nothing, no place to eat or stay, so they all stayed at our house. So at dinner and around, I heard all the conversations.

I wasn't in the battle, but I was in earshot of it so I could hear what they were talking about. Then for the first time I actually saw strategizing, people making plans and so forth, and to get the feel of the importance of this in 1930.

James Shephard, I've already told you, was one of my father's closest friends, and they almost broke up, broke friendship. Jim Shephard was for Parker, because he was trying to run this school and he needed his support and the other white support and money and so forth, and he felt he should go along, but my daddy said, "I'm very sorry, Jim. I can't go with you."

They had some difficult times, but their friendship was strong enough to overcome this, and the friendship lasted.

But the first thing I knowed was Walter White, who came down, executive secretary, he was the whitest white man I ever saw in my life. He had blond hair, blue eyes, blond mustache, blond eyelashes. When he came in, and he was going to live there in the house, I was a little afraid, because I thought that he might be passing; might be an imposter. I couldn't understand in those days why a white man would want to pass for a black, and he certainly didn't have to. He married twice. The first time he married, he married a black woman; the second time he married a white woman. But he could have done anything

he wanted to do. I'd never seen anybody as white as that in my life. His name was White, too.

At any rate, this is the beginning of this.

Q: You said that it got really nasty when your father was opposing Parker. What kinds of things happened?

Rivera: Oh, well, my father was threatened physically and he was threatened ostracism by blacks.

Q: Did people boycott his business?

Rivera: No. Well, it would be difficult, because he one of two dentists there. No, the rank and file blacks were supportive of him; it was those who had some ax to grind who felt that they needed to support him because of the positions that they held.

But I have here, it's an interesting thing, about a month ago, Julius Chambers, who is chancellor of North Carolina State University, won the John J. Parker Award, and I knew he didn't know the background, but that was sixty-five years ago, and Julius Chambers is not sixty-five years old. So what I did, I wrote him a letter and I congratulated him on receiving the award, but I also gave him the background. Much of what I have told you is in this little brief letter that I wrote to Julius, and I sent him the documentation so that he would know. I'll give you a copy of this if you want it.

Q: Yes, please.

Rivera: Of course, you know, the letter is confidential.

But at any rate, John J. Parker was defeated by one vote. This was the first major national success of NAACP. NAACP was about twenty years old at this time; 1930, about twenty years old.

Q: Was there a chapter of the NAACP in Greensboro?

Rivera: Oh, yeah.

Q: So your father was active in the NAACP?

Rivera: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. But, you see, here's the thing about it, if you don't understand the NAACP. A lot of people contributed, teachers and all; they would not ever let it be known that they did. They would send money, but they didn't want a membership card or anything that would divulge that they were a member of NAACP. To be a member of NAACP could have caused loss of [unclear] or similar problems.

So what I'm trying to say to you is that a whole lot of people who were members that nobody ever knew they were members, and my father was different because he was self-employed. He was a dentist, and nobody could hurt him. He got a lot of

strength from the fact that he was, and the blacks knew that he was fighting their cause, so they would support him, even in the ministry. But they used to have a joke around in Greensboro, said that Old Doc would have your mouth wide open and the telephone was ringing, he'd say, "I'll be right back," and he'd leave you and your mouth open. He was fighting these racial battles.

Q: So he fought them all of his life?

Rivera: All of his life until after the Depression, he moved down to where he lost a lot of property and everything. He said, "If I've got to start over, I'm not going to start over in the South. I'm just not going to start over." So he started looking around and found one in New York. My mother, being a South Carolinian, she was from Florence--Florence and Charleston and all around. But anyway, she said he didn't want to live in New York City and she didn't want to live anywhere that she didn't have a little garden and a porch. So they found a house in Yonkers, New York, and that;s just about fourteen miles out of New York City. That was close enough, anyway, so they moved to New York.

Q: Do you remember what year it was?

Rivera: What year it was he moved?

Q: Yes.

Rivera: Middle thirties is the best I can put it.

Q: You mentioned that he lost his property. Did that have anything to do with his opposition to Parker?

Rivera: I think the Depression just got him.

Q: The type of race that your father ran against John J. Parker, what type of race was it?

Rivera: He didn't. Parker was nominated for the United States Supreme Court, and this was no race. Parker was nominated. You'd have to read the story, but to get the nomination, you have to get a certain amount of votes from the legislature in the United States Congress. That's the reason why, I guess, this is so important, that they were able to convince the United States Congress that this man should not be in the Supreme Court.

Q: So that's why your father opposed him?

Rivera: My father opposed him because he felt that he was a racist. John J. Parker had made some statements. [Telephone

interruption.]

Q: I know you told us that your father opposed Parker. What type of steps did he take to oppose him?

Rivera: Contacted the NAACP.

Q: What was the campaign against Parker like? Did they write letters to senators?

Rivera: Oh, yeah, telegrams, letters. A lot of this is here. [Referring to documentation.]

Q: So these are all letters that were sent to all these senators.

Rivera: That's your background material.

Q: What kind of steps did your father take to oppose the white power structure, say, in Greensboro? It seemed like he was active in opposing segregation in any way that he could. Did he instill that in you, this opposition to segregation?

Rivera: He didn't do it with any program. I got it from just being at home and in and among it, observing it.

Q: Did he do any specific things like not drink out of the "colored only" water fountains?

Rivera: No, because my father looked like a white man, and nobody, except people who knew him, would not know who was drinking out of the fountain, to start with. But he just fought any kind of discrimination. He was always doing it. Any kind of injustice, racial injustice, and any kind of discrimination. So I lived among this, lived in it, see, and as I was telling you, people from the NAACP that came down always stopped at the house and they just felt that was an open door for them. So I heard it all.

But nobody encouraged me. I don't think my father actually wanted me to bother with it, because he realized how much that would take away from your life, normal life, and things that you wanted to do. So he never encouraged me to do it; I just was in it all the time.

Q: Could you describe the neighborhood that you grew up in?

Rivera: I grew up in a neighborhood near Bennett College. It was a quiet residential neighborhood. Across the street from me was a church. On the side, on one side there was vacant property that was owned by us, was nobody close on that side. We had a neighbor on the other side who was just a friend. But it was nothing unusual; just a quiet residential neighborhood.

Q: Who were some of the other NAACP leaders in Greensboro or here also?

Rivera: Not in a fight, because he was almost alone in it.

Q: Were there any ministers involved in it, or churches involved in opposing Parker?

Rivera: I don't remember, but I'm sure there were. I'm sure there were, because he had grass-root support. He did not have the support of the establishment, so to speak.

Q: So he had, say, the support of the farmers and the sharecroppers?

Rivera: Yeah, and teachers and all. I mean, even those people who could get hurt, he had their support, but they weren't out singing "We Shall Overcome." No.

Q: Not in the 1930s.

Rivera: No. They were hoping to overcome, but they weren't obvious about it.

Q: You came back to Central in 1939.

Rivera: 1939.

Q: Two years later, World War II breaks out. Were you involved?

Rivera: '41. On that Sunday, December 7, 1941, we were returning with the football team from Columbus, Georgia, and somebody on the train said that we'd been attacked. So it really didn't dawn on me the seriousness of it at that time, but that whole football team, virtually the whole football team, was disbanded and went somewhere; they were drafted and all. Those who came back to school, came back to school in '45, '46, some of them on the G.I. Bill, which was one of the first government educational bills that they had and so forth.

Q: Were you drafted?

Rivera: No. I left here and went to work in Norfolk, Virginia, on the [*Norfolk*] *Journal and Guide* newspaper. It was a highly respected newspaper. It was mainly North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia.

Q: How were you made aware of that job?

Rivera: I had job offers. I never had a résumé in my life. I

never had one. I never applied for a job; none. But I was always, from the time I was in school here, by virtue, see, of me running a news bureau, all of the newspapers and magazines got releases and pictures from us, so they knew the work that we were doing here. So I was always getting offers.

I had a falling-out with Dr. Shephard. He told me that he was going to put over me a man with a Ph.D., a Dr. Charles Ray.

He said, "I'm going to appoint Dr. Charles Ray head of the news bureau." Well, for a university, the more people you could have heading up departments with Ph.D.'s, the bigger your school is, you know.

So I said, "Well, I'm not going to work. I mean, you can appoint him, but first of all, I don't plan to sit here and do the work and have some Ph.D. sign his name to everything. I'm not going to take that."

He told me, "You will like him. I just knew that you all would get along perfectly."

I said, "Well, we might, but I'm not going to work for him." So that's the reason I left. And he was exactly right, because Charlie Ray and I became the best friends we could possibly become. He's dead now.

So I went on to the *Journal and Guide* to work.

Q: I need to flip the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Rivera: And it was a good thing that I did, because there where I was working for the *Journal and Guide*, the navy decided that they were going to open up an Office of Intelligence, ONI, Office of Naval Intelligence, to blacks. But I didn't know this, and somebody had recommended me.

So I'm on my porch, and a policeman came up and arrested me, and I didn't know for what. I said, "What is this about?" So I was carried to the police station, carried straight through, and in the back of the police station there was like a conference room and there these navy brass were sitting in there, and I was introduced to them. The commander took one look at me, shook his head, and said, "No. He'll never do. He'll never do."

So I told the commander, I said, "Now, listen. I don't understand what all this is about. What is it I won't ever do, I'll never do about? What is this?" I said, "You've got to explain to me."

So he said, "Well, I told the reporter that I wanted a nondescript Negro."

I said, "Well, if you're talking about what I have on, clothes and whatnot," I said, "look. I'm about as nondescript as you can get. None of this is tattooed to me. I can wear anything you want to wear. I can come down, do just what you want, but I want to know what it's about."

So then he got a little interested and we started talking,

talking about my background. At that time I'd had two years of law, law training. So he said, "Well, we'll think about it. I'm not going to say no."

So I was sitting on the porch again and a policeman came by, and this time he carried me to the naval base, the navy base. His name was Glass; Commander Glass. I went out there, and Commander Glass said, "I found you interesting. I rethought my position, and we're going to hire you."

So then I was carried into Naval Intelligence in Norfolk, Norfolk naval base, and there I spent the duration.

Q: Was that a segregated unit or was it integrated?

Rivera: What?

Q: The Naval Intelligence program.

Rivera: You never know. It was integrated. I did know, but I wasn't supposed to know. They also brought in a close friend of mine, so we got together and we admitted to each other that we had been hired. But it was integrated. Naval Intelligence was integrated, my goodness, all over the world, but that was the first time they had brought some black people.

Q: I know you might not be able to go into what exactly you did, but what were some of your duties as a naval intelligence

officer?

Rivera: Undercover.

Q: But you got into neighborhoods?

Rivera: Oh, yeah. Anything. We watched, we listened to conversations, and usually especially at parties, people drinking. They had an expression in those days: Loose lips sink ships. You ever heard it?

Q: Yes.

Rivera: Loose lips sink ships. So we were listening to people with loose lips talking, especially at any party affair where there would be naval people. See, if a naval person says, "Well, I've got to ship out tomorrow," that's a no-no, just saying, "I've got to leave," because anybody who's smart enough will find out what unit you're attached to, and they know then, then and there, that your unit is going out tomorrow, they know what ship it is, how many people on it, just by saying one thing, "Well, I've got to ship out tomorrow." And just by saying that one thing would be enough to involve a whole ship. Well, it could be more than that, because it could be a fleet, because the ship would very seldom go by itself in wartime.

Those were the kind of things--listening and observing and

any little bit that you could pick up--and I reported directly to Captain Glass.

Q: I was reading some of the information that Paul gave us on your background, and there was something there about you working for the [*Pittsburgh*] *Courier* and traveling through the South.

Rivera: I was supposed to do North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, but I did all over the world with them.

Q: What about the issue of lynching?

Rivera: I covered the last lynching in South Carolina--that was Earl Warren [later corrected to Willie Earl]--and I covered the last lynching in Georgia, and that was Isaiah Nixon. I covered the last lynching attempt in North Carolina, and that was a boy named Buddy Bush in Jackson, North Carolina. Those are the last that I covered, that I was involved in.

Q: How did these communities treat you as an African American photojournalist coming into the community to expose the lynchings that were going on in these communities?

Rivera: They didn't like it.

Q: Was your life threatened?

Rivera: I was in threatening situations, but I never had anybody to put a gun to me and say, "This is it," but I've been in some very tough situations.

Q: What kinds of situations?

Rivera: Well, in the Warren [later corrected to Earl] case in Greenville, South Carolina, I went to the judge's chambers to present my press pass in order to get court pass and whatnot. So the bailiff came to the door and said, "What do you want?"

I said, "I need my court passes and whatnot."

He said, "Who are you?" So I gave him my press pass. He snatched it and slammed the door, and I didn't know whether to ever expect to see him again or my pass. I guess about ten minutes--it seemed longer, but I'm sure it wasn't any longer than about ten minutes--he came back and said, "The judge wants to see you."

So I went in to see the judge, a very nice fellow named Judge Martin. He said, "This is a very difficult case. I'm going for a conviction." He said, "I'm going to need your help. This is a bad situation." Thirty-one taxi-cab drivers had lynched this guy.

I gave you a wrong name. Correct that. I don't know why I said Earl Warren; Willie Earl. Willie Earl.

So he said, "Thirty-one taxi-cab drivers killed him, took

him out and lynched him." He said, "Now, in South Carolina, the law allows anybody being held for murder to have their next-of-kin with them." So he said, "Now, in this court down here, there are going to be sixty-two people. They're not proud of what they did, so they don't want any publicity about it." He said, "When they see you and see that camera around your neck, they are assuming that you can use it." And he said, "Now, I can't be responsible. There's no way in the world for me to give you protection and be responsible for you. So I'm going to ask you to sit in the balcony."

I said, "Oh, no." I said, "Oh, no, I can't do that."

He said, "Now, I asked you. I know you want a conviction as much as I do, so I'm just asking you. You think about it. Think about it. It's going to be dangerous for you, it's going to be difficult for me with you sitting down there, just sitting there."

So I went home, and I was with a fellow who had covered the Scottsboro lynching. I don't know whether you ever heard of it, the Scottsboro lynching case, one of the early cases. I said, "Can you imagine the judge asking me to sit upstairs in the balcony and he would tell me that this is intense?" I said, "I don't see anything intense here."

He said, "Let me tell you one thing. The intensity here is worse than I've ever seen it."

So then I became frightened, because I said, "Well, if I don't know it, if I don't feel it, I'm subject to be hurt."

So then I went back and he said, "Yeah, you better sit in the balcony. For your good, you sit in the balcony."

So I went back the next morning and I told the judge, yes, I would, I would sit in the balcony.

I had gotten a room with a lady whose husband had been on the paper; they had a very nice place, a nice house. I was referred to her from here. So the next morning when I met her, she said, "Look. You didn't tell me that you were covering this lynching case."

I said, "Yeah, I'm with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and I thought you knew."

She said, "I'm here by myself. I'm a widow woman. I don't know what they would do to me if they just knew that you were staying here. They'd burn this house down with me and you both in it." So she asked me to leave.

So the next morning, I had to leave. I didn't have a place to stay or anything. So the preacher there, who was also chairman of the NAACP, said, "Come on over to my house." He was by himself, he wasn't married, so that's where I ended up. That's where all of us stayed; all the newspaper people stayed at his house.

It was in the summertime, I forget the month, but one day I was sitting up typing, before a window, and he came in and said, "Boy, are you crazy?" And he virtually snatched me away from the window. He said, "Look. You're going to get killed sitting up there in front of that window." He asked me about being in

danger and so forth, and he made me move. On Sunday, he asked us to go to church with him, and I said, "No, I'm going to take this time to rest. I'm just tired. You go ahead. If you don't mind, I'm going to rest."

So when he packed his briefcase, I saw him put a pistol on top. I said, "Is that the only pistol you've got in this house?"

He said, "Yeah."

I said, "Well, yeah, I'm going with you, because I'm going with that pistol." So we went to church with him.

But to show you how, here's a minister and he preached in his sermon, he told us to go to Sears, said, "I want everybody to go to Sears and buy a gun." There's a minister preaching that kind of talking stuff.

Q: This was in the fifties?

Rivera: No, '48. '47 or '48. The other one was '47, I think it was. '47 or '48.

Q: Why was Willie Earl lynched?

Rivera: He was supposed to have said something to some white girl, and didn't do anything, but attempting to make a date or something, that somebody said that he did.

Q: In the other cases, was it--

Q: Isaiah Nixon?

Q: Something like that.

Rivera: No. Isaiah Nixon voted.

Q: He voted?

Rivera: Isaiah Nixon voted. And Buddy Bush, the one that almost had a lynching, in Jackson, North Carolina, he said something on the street to some white girl, on Saturday afternoon, in the street going to the theater. He was supposed to have said something to her.

I covered another case, the Mac Ingram case; I forgot the exact date of that, but it was all in this same time frame. Mac Ingram was convicted in two courts, the municipal court and the supreme court. He was convicted for leering--now, "leering" is an old English word that means "to stare." But he didn't say anything, because he was across a field. And this girl said that he "leered" at her. He was across the field, you know. So he was convicted in two courts, and it wasn't until we got a letter from Thurgood Marshall,* NAACP, the *Courier* had asked to

*Thurgood Marshall (1908-199?). U.S. jurist, lawyer. As associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court (1967-199?), the

send me over to Yancyville. This was in Yancyville, North Carolina.

So I went over there, and sure enough, we found that he had actually been convicted in two courts. So once it hit the national press, we were able to expose the irony of this, and he was freed.

Q: Do you remember the name of the preacher in the Willie Earl or the church?

Rivera: I'd have to go back to--see, I know I sound careless, but everything that I've done is either in the Library of Congress or one of these libraries. It's all in those back papers. I'd have to go back. When I was doing the work, it was just a job, a day-by-day job, and when the job was over, when the day was over, then I'd look for something, a drink or something to do, to have some fun. I didn't have any idea that I was involved in any historic episodes at all.

Q: Obviously you traveled a lot for these cases, and the whole issue of travel for African Americans in the South was a difficult one. Did you have to, say, stop at the side of the

first black to serve on the Court. Chief of the legal staff of the NAACP (1940-61); argued the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* before the U.S. Supreme Court, 1954; U.S. solicitor general (1965-67).

road to sleep, or could you find places to stay everywhere you went?

Rivera: I was never sure. Now, the Isaiah Nixon case, this brings up the--I had a Buick, a Roadmaster Buick. When I left here, I was dressed as a chauffeur. There's a cap right in that closet, and I'll save it forever, because it saved my life. I was dressed as a chauffeur, a chauffeur cap, a little black bow tie, and wherever I wanted to stop, at a filling station or anything, I was accorded all privileges because in the situation, I would [unclear], I was working for some white person, they would assume, and where they would deny, would have denied me had I been dressed otherwise. They'd say, "Come on in. What do you want?"

"Blah, blah, blah."

"Yeah, okay." But they treated me--now, another trick that I used to use if I was afraid and I'm driving down the highway and I saw a white hitchhiker, he'd stop and I'd say, "Yeah, come on, come on." Now, everybody knew then that I was working for him. He was hitchhiking; he didn't even have money enough to ride. But just to see, they would assume that I was driving for him, see, and so I would do that as a safety measure a lot of times.

Q: Did you do that every time you were out?

Rivera: No, not every time, but just sometimes. No. But you always, when you got to your destination, you always filled up with gas. When you got to your destination, where you were, you do not know how fast you're going to have to leave and whatnot, so the first thing you do, before you do anything, make any contacts at all, fill up with gasoline so you'd get a good running start, as good as you can have.

The Isaiah Nixon case, this is as close as I ever came to death, and I'll tell you about it. When I got to the little town, I met a man cleaning off the front of his house, and so I asked him if he knew Isaiah Nixon. He said, "Yeah, I know him."

I said, "Will you take me up there?"

He says, "You can't get up there in that car."

I said, "Well, will you take me up there?"

"No."

I said, "Well, I'll give you \$25 to take me up there."

So he says, "Okay," he said he'd take me. So he took me up, and this was between--it's very eerie--between where the pine trees were being bled for rosin and the buckets are hanging on the trees. You ever seen that sight? We go up and it's winding like this, and it's just room for an automobile, for a car to go up.

So I went up to the opening, the clearing, a house up there and a clearing. The mother was there with little children, and I interviewed her, took pictures of her, took pictures of children, talked to her. This fellow who took me up to the

woods was just waiting there.

So we left, and we made this turn and got back down in this turpentine area, and there was a car waiting there, full of whites. Well, I just knew it was up then. I said to this guy who took me up, I said, "Who are they?"

He said, "One of them's the high sheriff. I don't know the other guys," talking under his breath.

So the guy who he said was the high sheriff came around and said, "Who is this?" He knew him. Said, "Who is this you've got with you?"

So he said, "He came up to see about funeral rights for Nixon." I had not told him to say that, because I didn't expect to be having a problem, so we didn't come up with any escape alibi at all, you know.

So they told us to back up and carried us back up to this area that we just left. Well, I didn't expect anything, so we hadn't come up with any concoction of anything to escape. So he told us to stay in the car. So this guy, the high sheriff, went in the house. I said, "Well, I guess I don't know what to think now, sure enough."

The kids out there--in those days they had a little flashbulb about the size of my--we used to call them peanuts, a little flashbulb, and I had shot a lot of pictures around there.

As you shoot the bulb, you just throw them away. So they were all over the yard. The kids were playing with them. All around this car, people were sitting there, and these little kids said,

"And when the man took my picture, then the light went off and I got scared." And they asked this child, "What did you do?"

So the guy came out of the house. "You can go now." I don't know whether they were just letting us down where those trees are or actually letting me, you know, go, because I don't know what they said in the house or nothing.

So I got back down to my car, and the nearest town from where I was was Atlanta, not coming back home. I told you about having a full tank of gas. So I headed for Atlanta, because that was the nearest big town. So I headed for Atlanta, and I went straight to Bishop Fountain. He was the bishop of my church. I went straight to Bishop Fountain's house. I was nervous as I could be. When I got there, I rang the bell and he came to the door. He knew me because I covered a lot of stories, you know. He looked at me, he said, "Yes?"

I said, "Bishop Fountain."

He said, "Yes?"

Then all of a sudden he said, "Alex!" He said, "What in the world is that you've got on?" Talking about my chauffeur's cap. I'd forgotten I had it on. Then he said, "Come in here."

I told him what had happened. But that was the nearest I ever came to actually meeting my maker, I think.

Q: What city was that in Georgia, do you remember?

Rivera: No, but it was in the country. I'd have to find out

what it is. I'd have to check some notes I have upstairs. It was out in the country. Newman. I think it was Newman, close to Newman, Georgia. I'm not sure. I'd have to check that. I think it's Newman, Georgia.

Q: How much longer do you have?

Rivera: I don't care. Am I talking too much?

Q: No, no! I didn't know if you had something planned for later today.

When did you come back to Durham to live?

Rivera: After the war. Immediately after the war, I went to work with *Pittsburgh Courier*. That's what I was doing then. So this was--see, I married in 1941 and I married a girl whose parents live right here, and all of them are dead; my first wife, she's dead, and her mother and father are dead. So I was in and out of this very house.

Then I came back here after the war, and it was in 1974 that they came back. I was over here and they kept coming. "We want you to come back to work. We know we can't offer you what you could get and what we would like to pay, but we want you to come back."

I said, "Well, you haven't made an offer yet. You don't know what," you know.

So we were kind of playing cat and mouse and I was teasing. So they made an offer. I said, "Well, I don't blame you for being ashamed, but since I'm this close, I'll see how it works out. We'll try it for a while." That was in 1974.

Q: Since I've been here, I've heard a lot about the different black neighborhoods in Durham. Could you describe some of those to me? I'm really not sure exactly which ones they were and where they were located and what the people were like in them. Do you know much about that?

Rivera: The first would not be a neighborhood; it would be a business district. The first would be the business district, which was the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, the Mutual Savings & Loan Company. They were on Parrish Street.

Q: Were those businesses owned--you talked about the interlocking boards.

Rivera: Yeah. Now, that street, because of the--I didn't give you the bank, the Mechanics and Farmers Bank. Three businesses on there. After the Bank Holiday was over--and you remember that was under [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt when the Bank Holiday was over, the Mechanics and Farmers Bank was the first bank to open. Of all the banks in Durham, it was the first bank to open. So as far as the business establishment was concerned,

they got the reputation of being the soundest bank in town, so they got a lot of white business, especially Jewish business, a lot of it.

Q: Did that bank have white businesspeople dealing with them and had white depositors and that kind of thing?

Rivera: Yeah, they did, but they got more after the Bank Holiday, when it was first opened. See, they got more then because they figured that it was solid, a solid bank. Others were struggling, and this bank, the first day they opened right up.

But that district, that financial district, was called the Black Wall Street.

Q: Black Wall Street?

Rivera: The Black Wall Street of the U.S.A. because of the business there. Now, when you leave there, the next district, you start getting into typical black businesses; that would be restaurants and drugstores, barbershops, and beauty salons, those coming on, those things.

Q: That's along where the freeway runs now, isn't it?

Rivera: No. Before the freeway. Before the freeway and after,

both, because the freeway wasn't there, you know. So the freeway just cut through it. That district was called H_____.

There was another district that you almost never hear of that was behind, a little area behind the Wonderland Theater.

Wonderland Theater was a neighborhood there. That was called Mexico, and Mexico was tough. No policeman would go in there by himself; I mean none. I don't care how brave or crazy he was, he wouldn't go in there by himself.

Q: Were there like [unclear] joints and--

Rivera: Everything. Everything.

Q: Did many people live in that neighborhood?

Rivera: Yeah, they had residents in there, yeah. But you had all types of--you didn't have dope; you had bootleg liquor. But you didn't have dope, but had some gambling and bootleg liquor and some prostitution, especially down in Mexico. But it was rough.

Then, of course, H_____ stopped at Enterprise Street. It would be about Enterprise and Fayetteville. Then you had from there on down, Fayetteville Street was where all of the big enterprising families lived, all of them down Fayetteville Street.

Q: So the people who owned businesses in the black business district would have probably lived in this neighborhood?

Rivera: Yeah. From here back. Yeah, from here back. My father-in-law was principal of the school. Before coming here, he was president of Kittrell College. So that will give you an idea of what type that you had.

Q: Excuse me. What was the name of the college?

Rivera: Kittrell College, which is in Kittrell, North Carolina. It was an AME school, African Methodist Episcopal school.

Q: Was it a college?

Rivera: Yeah. Kittrell College.

Q: Was it a liberal arts college?

Rivera: Yeah, it was liberal arts, because they didn't have any vocation.

Now, that's about it as far as the districts.

Q: What about the Bottom? I hear about the Bottom, too.

Rivera: The Bottom was over--not in this area at all. It's

northwest. Northwest was all residential, and where a lot of the people lived who worked at the tobacco factories here. We had tobacco factories and hosiery mills, where a lot of those people lived, but it was over in the northwest section. People don't call it now, but it still was called the Bottom, as the people referred to it, you know.

Q: Did you go out and photograph these neighborhoods?

Rivera: Almost all my entire thing was from the school and the businesses. I had no interest in the sociological side of it; I mean, pictures. I never had any interest in taking pictures of people. First of all, they couldn't buy the picture.

[Laughter] I knew they were there. There's some things that my own attitude was, it didn't need to be preserved for posterity.

I guess I should have. Looking back over it, I would have, but I didn't.

Q: What kinds of pictures did you take? Was it of people, of buildings? I haven't seen much of your work. Can you describe some of it?

Rivera: Well, all the pictures that I took, virtually all the pictures that I took, were for the newspaper story that I was doing, to illustrate the story. You go down to the library, you'll see some down there, to give you an idea of the kind of

stuff we took.

Q: Were you involved in the civil rights movement here in the fifties and sixties? Were you active in that, also, or did you just cover it as a reporter?

Rivera: Just as a reporter. That was my involvement.

Q: I was reading that you took photos for the *Brown* [*v. Board of Education of Topeka*]* case. Did you go to all the different cities and communities that were involved in the *Brown* case, like Summerton, South Carolina, and those other places?

Rivera: You might know, and you might not know, the case that was really involved was not *Brown*; it was Clarendon County School System.

Q: The *Briggs* case.

Rivera: The *Briggs* case. You know about that?

Q: Yes.

*May 17, 1954 - U.S. Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, unanimously banned racial segregation in public schools.

Rivera: Well, that was the pivotal case, the *Briggs* case. That was the case that Thurgood Marshall was on. Thurgood Marshall was not in the *Brown* case. The *Brown* case was handled by Greenburg, Jack Greenburg. What happened was--and all of this stuff that you see, they almost never mention *Briggs* and never mention Clarendon County, but that's where it all was.

The Clarendon County case, it started when the people in Clarendon County asked the school officials for a bus. They didn't even ask for a new bus; they asked for a bus, just a bus to transport the kids to school. They were told, "If you want a bus, go out and buy one."

So then that's when the stuff hit the fan; the blacks got angry. Well, then they got the NAACP, and the NAACP said, "We ain't gonna ask for no bus." So then they started out asking for separate but equal. That's how it started--separate but equal.

One morning, Judge J. [unclear] Waring called Thurgood Marshall into his chambers. We were sitting in the courtroom, didn't know why he was called in. Thurgood Marshall came out of the courtroom. Thurgood was a big guy, always full of life, you know. So he came back and he didn't have any smile on his face and we didn't know what in the world that judge had told him to put him in that mood. Thurgood came around to the group of lawyers and said, "Judge Waring told me he did not want to hear another separate-but-equal case. He said, 'I want you to bring now a full attack on segregation.'"

Well, the NAACP planned to do that somewhere in the future, but they weren't planning to do that that morning. So the NAACP was meeting in Boston, so Thurgood Marshall had to call Roy Wilkins* to tell him what the situation was. Roy Wilkins was [unclear]. Everybody [unclear].

So finally he decided that they were going to have to bring a formal attack on segregation, but then they told Judge Waring, they said, "Now, we'll win this case under you, because you've asked. But in the appellate court, in the three-judge court, we aren't going to have but one vote, and that's yours, and we're going to lose it."

He said, "Yeah, you're right. You're going to lose in the appellate court, but then what? Then you automatically get to the Supreme Court, and that's where you want to be. That's where you want to be. You want to be in the Supreme Court."

So they did, and exactly what happened, what he told them, they won in his court, they lost in appellate court, and went to the Supreme Court.

But all of this was done because of the work done in *Briggs*, and the reason why it was called *Brown* and not *Briggs* was that normally it would be named alphabetically. All right. But, now, it was not named *Briggs* because the feeling was that

*Roy Wilkins (1901-1981). U.S. civil rights leader. Considered the senior statesman of the U.S. civil rights movement; editor of *Crisis* (1934-49); as executive director of NAACP (1965-77), sought equal rights via legal redress.

in the Supreme Court, when it went to the Supreme Court, that they would not have a feeling of, "Here's another attack on the South." See?

Q: It was *Brown v. Topeka*.

Rivera: That's right. So they said, "We don't want them to feel that, 'Okay, here you come again; another attack on the South,'" so they named it the *Brown* case, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. And that's how it was not *Briggs*.

Q: I need to flip the tape.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Q: What were the people in Clarendon County like? Obviously you visited Clarendon County. You covered it as a news reporter?

Rivera: When you see the display down at the school, you'll see a picture down there called "Freedom Fighters." They look nothing like Freedom Fighters; they were just ordinary people, and they were determined that whatever the cost was, whatever the consequences were, they were going to fight it out. They raised money in churches and all around, in [unclear], all around. During the struggle, the black schools burned down; the

principal's house was burned down.

Q: And you covered all of this? You were there?

Rivera: Yeah.

Q: Did you actually see the burnings?

Rivera: [Unclear]. Most of the deliberations, the early deliberations, were held in, of all places, the Liberty Hill Methodist Church, AME Church, in Clarendon County. It was named Liberty. I was thinking about how significant this was--Liberty Hill AME Church. But it was very, very interesting.

Q: Do you remember whether your family was involved in the church at all?

Rivera: Uh-huh.

Q: Were you active in the NAACP throughout this period? Were you a member of the NAACP?

Rivera: Yeah. I was a member, but I didn't do anything for the NAACP but cover these cases. They knew I was sent to cover cases, and they would write to the headquarters in Pittsburgh, and Pittsburgh would assign me to cover it.

Q: They would request you?

Rivera: Well, they knew I was the only person here. They really didn't have to request me. They would request.

Q: How do you think your coverage of these cases and the lynchings affected the civil rights movement? Do you think it had an impact on the black community's willingness to step out and take chances and to fight the system of segregation?

Rivera: Well, all support helps. My main support was exposing these things. As long as you could do something, see, the great fear was publicity. That was the great fear, that "What we're doing is going to be exposed." You had the white papers that were part of the establishment, and the white people weren't going to expose all; they were going to expose it with their slant and their way. So by having a black newspaper and a black reporter, I had tremendous impact. I mean, anybody else in my same position would have had the same thing, I do believe. I had tremendous impact on that.

The battle to break down segregation at the University of North Carolina, I was pivotal in that.

Q: How so?

Rivera: By exposing it. By exposing it. The thing about it, everybody, as soon as they had a problem, came right here where you're sitting, to tell me, you see. A lot of it, I wouldn't even have to go out to investigate; they'd bring it to me because they knew that this was the only way they were going to get it in the paper.

Q: Were there other black reporters like yourself?

Rivera: For another black newspaper here, the *Carolina Times*, but they didn't have national. See, I was working for the largest black paper in the country, so what I wrote went nationally. What I wrote was read by the White House, the Senate, the Congress, everybody. You understand? Not because of me, but because I was working for the largest newspaper in the world.

When [Richard M.] Nixon got ready to go to Africa, he said, "I want Alex Rivera to go to Africa with me," and he wasn't thinking of going to Africa without some blacks anyway, but we won an award together, so he knew me and he asked me to go with him. That was March [6] 1957, with the independence of Ghana.

Q: Did you know Nixon before he asked you to go? I wasn't clear on that. You said you were in the war together.

Rivera: No, we weren't in the war; we won an award together.

Q: Won an award. I'm sorry. What kind of award?

Rivera: Mine was for reporting. We reported the impact of the *Brown* decision, and he won an award--I don't know what it was for, but we were receiving these awards together at the same time.

Q: So you'd met him.

Rivera: Yeah.

Q: Can you tell us is there any one particular highlight, or several highlights, of your career that are most distinguished times?

Rivera: I doubt it. You see, what I was saying, it was all a day's work with me. Some things were interesting, and I gave you the one that was most exciting, was the one I thought I was going to lose my life. I guess that would be--yeah, because I knew I was gone then.

Q: Did you maintain any contact with Nixon after the trip to Ghana?

Rivera: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I visited him at his home, and we

had a reunion for the group that went to Africa with him and so forth. We corresponded.

Q: This is going way back to the beginning of our interview, but you said you established a news bureau at Central. What did that involve, establishing a news bureau? Did you start from scratch?

Rivera: Yeah, because they didn't have any. It involved the preparation of stories and pictures about the university, but by me being a photojournalist, then I also did it for this whole area. Then when our teams played another team in this area, other schools didn't have photographers, and they'd ask us, "Please send us some pictures of the game when you get back." So our stuff was going all around everywhere, and that's why people knew what we were doing.

Q: I was reading about you being student-body president of Central, of your senior class, and how Dr. Shephard really wanted you to do something else, to work for the school paper. How did that play out? [Tape recorder turned off.]

You were talking about student-body president and that situation.

Rivera: Well, I already told you that Dr. Shephard treated me like a son of his, and so this is the relationship we had all

the time. Well, the student body, by acclimation, voted me president of the student body; I didn't campaign for it or anything. As a student, I was a little older than my classmates, because, as I told you, at Howard I dropped out of school and was out about three or four years. I was older than most of them, and so I also had the background and experience at Howard University, and I had no fear of Dr. Shephard whatsoever, because he was just like an uncle of mine. So I was outspoken.

So by being outspoken, the kids said, "Here's the person we need to represent us." So here I was.

So Dr. Shephard, not having control of student government--he wanted control of everything--said, "No, I don't want you to be president of the student body. I want you to be editor of the school newspaper."

I said, "But the students want me to be president of the student body, so that's what I'm going to be. They asked me to be president."

He said, "Well, I'm not going to give you a place to meet."

I said, "Well, we'll find somewhere to meet."

So we used to meet in front of the dining room. I knew to have the meeting in front of the dining hall because I'd always have an audience. I knew I'd have a good audience coming in that dining room. So we had our meeting after lunch. We always had our meeting after lunch, because I had a built-in crowd coming out.

I would tell him, in speaking, "Okay, Dr. Shephard, we are

now meeting in God's auditorium. Now what are you going to do about that?" [Laughter] It was just one of those things.

Q: What kinds of programs did you enact as student-body president?

Rivera: We didn't do anything. I think we changed the climate. See, everything was so austere and so tyrannical. The girls had to be in by a certain time. The boys' dormitories were locked by midnight. There were a lot of things. Those were some of the things that we were able to change. But most of all, we were able to change, I think, the attitudes of the administration in some small measure towards the student body.

The school and administration felt that they had the personal responsibility for each person's safety and whatnot, and it was a little tough. So that's about the only thing we did.

Q: So there was more student participation and the student voice was heard.

Rivera: Yeah. They were kind of following our leadership. I don't think we did a whole lot, but in the short time, it's usually a year, but that's a short time and to go to school, too.

Q: Can you compare the differences between living in the segregated South, and I know Washington wasn't that much different, but was there a difference?

Rivera: Washington was the segregatedest single place I ever lived in in my life.

Q: So they had the same Jim Crow laws in Washington that they had in Durham?

Rivera: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Let me see. I'm trying to think of the name of the biggest store there in town. Black women couldn't try on anything. If you tried on a hat, you bought it; that was yours. So if you didn't know anything about it and you tried on three hats, you bought three hats. Of course, you didn't try on anything. When I say "anything," I am sure that they had to try on shoes, but no other clothes that I know of.

Q: So black business districts were very important.

Rivera: Oh, yes.

Q: You didn't have to go through that kind of--

Rivera: You had a hard, fast, distinct segregation--theaters,

everything. Now, we didn't have any black theaters here, but in Washington, D.C., they had black theaters, they weren't owned by blacks. They were owned by Jews, but they were operated by blacks.

Q: Owned by Jews.

Rivera: Owned by Jews, but operated--ticket-takers and managers and all that were all black.

Q: So blacks who went to theaters here in Durham had to go through a back entrance and sit in the balcony?

Rivera: Yeah. Yeah. All except we had one black theater in H_____, and that's the only black theater. They had one black theater here; that was called the Regal.

[End of interview]