February 3, 1992

KATHY HOKE: This is Kathy Hoke, and I'm here with Reverend Mac Legerton in Lumberton on February 3, 1992. Why don't we just start, and could you just tell me a little bit about where and when you were born and where you grew up?

MAC LEGERTON: Sure. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1951. It was a semi-suburban/rural area outside of the city limits that was the old property of some training grounds of Fort Gordon, which was a military base near Atlanta. So it was a fairly young, developed neighborhood that had a lot of woods. So it was outside the city. Economically, it was a mixed working class and lower-middle class, white neighborhood. My father is a pastor of a church near there, a Presbyterian Church, and he was the founding pastor. So when I was born, in those years it was a small congregation that sort of grew over the years. We lived in a multicultural area. There was a black community set behind the church. But, of course, all the churches were segregated. The high school I went to, Cross Keys High School, was integrated. I'm sure it was probably integrated when I was in elementary school. But it was an integrated, black-white, school. When I was in high school, we moved into an upper-middle income community on the other side of the church. I always think about that in terms of my development, because it was a very different community. The house was very different. It just didn't have the--you know, the first house was a one-story house with wooden
floors. The other house was a two-story, sizable home, and I never felt a sense of family in the other home that I felt in our first home. And some of my friends through high school still lived in the other community, which wasn't that far away -- the other side of Peachtree Street from where we moved. My mother was trained in education and was a full-time mother for the three of us children. I'm the middle child of three. I have an older sister and a younger brother. So that's a little bit about what and where I was born.

KH: What was going on in your life when the civil rights movement began in 1960? You would have been about nine?

ML: Yeah, well, the first memory that came when you said what was going on in my life, I think the biggest conflict and struggle that I had as a child was physical. I was born with a heart condition. At that time, neither the family, parental analysis and counseling, or the medical field was very adept or able to acknowledge or respond to what children go through in those sorts of experiences. So during those ten years, I mean, it was obvious by the age of five that I knew that at some point I was going to have to go into the hospital for an operation, because I made annual trips to Charleston, South Carolina, to the medical hospital there which had one of the best cardiology departments in the South. That was my father's roots. My father's home was Charleston. So I was left to my own resources, really, to deal with that experience. After synthesizing that whole experience as an adult in my mid-twenties, I realized that that reliance and development of my own resources to deal with
the insecurity and fear that went along with that experience is one of the most strengthening things that happened to me in my life, once I was able to synthesize all that had happened related to that experience, or at least the majority of what had happened [laughter]. Won't ever say all.

I'm going to say a word about race relations related to my father. My mother was from Maryland. My father was born into a upper income family in Charleston, South Carolina, his mother particularly, an old aristocratic family in South Carolina. When he decided to go into the ministry, he did not have a lot of support from his mom. I really actually never asked him how his father felt about it. But it was obviously a step down. So when he decided to do that -- I never asked him this -- but it's clear to me that he knew he wasn't going to do that in Charleston. So he took the church in Atlanta, and that was his first church, and he's been there for forty-five years and will retire this year from that same church. So that church through the years provided a lot of order and security for me in terms of my parents being in one spot for so long. But my father was much more progressive than his parents, and even though he was very quiet about it, it was obvious to me, even as a child, that he was different from his parents, and my mother was very different than her parents and siblings. Both were siblings and parents -- my two parents were very different. So they were the unusual members of their family, and that was very obvious to me in the family relationships. My grandmother, of course, in Charlestonian tradition, had a maid. In fact, when they went to the mountains
in the summer, they took their "maid" with them. That was my first personal experience of particularly unbalanced and oppressive race relations. And I always got to know the women very well, and always felt it very awkward that they were sort of forced to be away from their own family and children for two and three months of the year to serve and service my grandparents. So that personal experience at a fairly early age made me realize there was something quite unbalanced about race relations and treatment and the inhumanity of it. During the civil rights movement, of course, in Atlanta, we didn't have a lot of difficulty in our particular school. So from a child's standpoint I had fairly good relationships and experiences with, particularly, black or African-American people in my neighborhood. Actually, the middle income, upper-middle income community we moved to was closer. In fact, the black community began at the end of our street, and of course, every time we traveled to the church, we went directly through the black community to go to our church. So I didn't really have an experience of deep segregation like other southerners do until maybe their adult life. But my father was, I guess, one of the few white--at that time it was the suburbs of Atlanta -- suburban ministers who stood up in favor of integration. We had church members leave the church because of that.

KH: How many?

ML: Well, it wasn't. . . . I was too young to really get politically involved in any conflict at the church. I was enjoying my youthfulness, and of course, when I went to college
then, I was gone. But by that time, it was the early 1970s -- I mean the late '60s.

KH: This is the 1950s you're talking about?
ML: Yeah, '50s and '60s, and of course, since King was in Atlanta, and the religious community was very involved in... My father was part of the group of liberal, white Presbyterians that were sort of called the "Young Turks." They actually had a name for the group that supported social change in the church structure. But actually my parents really didn't talk about it that much. In fact, my parents were not real verbal about conflict, or real intimate about love, or showing affection. So in that way they carried on their traditions [laughter] that they grew up in. But the modeling was there and the sensitivity and critical reflection, particularly on the part of my father. And my mother carried the modeling of communication and social awareness and hospitality that I also learned a great deal from.

KH: So what impact did your having grown up in a church, your father being a minister, growing up in an integrated neighborhood, what impact did that have on your choosing to become a minister?
ML: Well, I won't say it was an integrated neighborhood. I think it was two segregated neighborhoods next to each other, so that's different.

KH: Integrated school?
ML: Yeah. Well, the thing that really struck me about religion at an early age -- at least the Christian religion that I was raised in -- was the symbol of the cross. And it always --
I've done an interview about this actually that I can share with you—but we had this big cross in the church, but hardly anyone ever pointed to it or acknowledged it. That always struck me as sort of strange, particularly when I learned what this cross was. And I think as a child I clearly understood that it was an instrument of persecution. So I didn't have a real romanticized view of it because it was clear and obvious to me what it was, particularly since there was this greater-than-life-size cross in our church. So I always looked at it with a sense of awe, and I grew that the central message of Christianity was directly tied to the cross. And to this day I think it's more tied to the cross than the resurrection. So the understanding of that cross and the commitment of risk, I guess, more than sacrifice, the commitment of risk that that cross symbolized, and entailed, not just symbolized, but literally entailed, always struck me as central to the meaning of life, you know, as I understood my own experience and what I was being taught about religion, in general, not just Christianity.

And I've always seemed to balance this contemplative and intellectual traditions in my family, and in life, and in my own development, and I think that balance, I looked for a profession which would acknowledge both morality and passion and, you know, critical thinking, and vision, and the ministry seemed to be the most obvious profession to me. Partially because I think that growing up we don't learn anything about this non-profit sector that I'm now a part of. You know, it's church, state, and business, and those are the three sort of options available to
people. I think the non-profit sector's grown since I was a child, but even today most people, younger people, are unaware of this whole sector. So it seemed to me the perfect place. I had a good model for it in my father, and I can share some of the critical moments when it was clear to me that I had two paths to choose from, and took three years. . . . I'll just go ahead and share that, and we can come back to some other experiences, some formative experiences. But I'm going to be cyclical if I can in this story, rather than literal here. When I went through college and then went to, I went to one year at seminary, Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. During that year, I realized for a number of reasons that I needed some time to think.

KH: What year was that?

ML: That was 1973 and '74. And I felt like sort of my future was being planned, not for me, but it was happening without me clearly making choices. So I wanted some time for discernment and reflection. So basically I did a pilgrimage of three years of figuring out where I wanted to spend the next -- what I wanted to do with the next part of my life. The two choices were clear to me -- either to take the route and become a pastor in a middle class, probably white, church, or to try to shape and create some other form of ministry that would be related more with the people who were victimized by the very systems and policies that I felt so much my religion was speaking to me about, both the victimized and the systems [laughter]. There were many things that shaped that clarity of choice. One of them was I worked for United Farm Workers that year when I was
in seminary, on the grape and lettuce boycott.

KH: In what state?

ML: In Kentucky. But I met, actually, quite a few farm workers and went to California for the first national convention of the United Farm Workers, its organizational convention, in the fall of '73, and just announced to my faculty and friends that I was going and just left seminary for two weeks and did it. I was getting some credit for my work with the farm workers through a course in Prophetic Ministry, but I just decided that I was going and went. It was a very important experience to see, you know, 2,000 people working democratically together. And that was my real first experience, mass experience, of being in a room, in a place, for an extended period of time where I was a minority person in terms of my race, not my power in the society but my race as an individual. That was a very deep, significant learning experience, plus the dynamism and the democratic process which I experienced in that convention. 'Course, there's some things that I've learned about charismatic leadership that, of course, come into play in all this work that continue to be problems in organizations. And you know, Cesar Chavez and that dynamic is a real one for them even today. But getting back, well, let me let you go back to the questions about any more about the civil rights movement. The anti-war movement also was quite significant in my experience, as well as the civil rights.

KH: Well, first, how old were you when you decided that the ministry was the path that you wanted to take?

ML: Well, it wasn't like an lightening bolt hit me. It was
just something that grew on me, you know, I grew into. And it's something that I always--when people would ask that question when I was younger, I said, "Well, I always felt that's what was meant to happen." Today with friends, I would say, you know, maybe this go round that's what [laughter], you know, this time around this is what was there for me to do, within me. So that's something that I just developed organically or naturally in my life.

KH: Well, why don't you tell me a little bit about how you came to Robeson County? What was the path that led you here? What were the events that brought you here?

ML: Okay. Well, I do want to go back to one event in college, because it relates to this growth of self confidence and courage [laughter] in my life. I went to Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. At the time, this was in 1969, and I didn't know this before I went there, but ROTC was still required for all male students. It used to be, I believe, an all male school. But ROTC provided the physical education requirements for the men. Women had a different program. But I had not really -- actually my moral values of love and peace were very strong, but they'd never been tested and never been thought out clearly, except I knew I didn't like the war. But as a high school student I wasn't involved in any activity surrounding it.

And of course, I entered college at the time when the height of it began. So the first day in ROTC, the first week of school, these papers were passed out. It said, "I will promise to defend my country against all enemies, foreign or domestic." I remember
that quote so vividly. And I thought about that, and it struck me, you know, I'm not sure I want to sign this. But, of course, the mechanism that they had in place was you weren't supposed to think about this. You were just supposed to sign it. I learned later, of course, they couldn't have gotten federal monies for my statistic, my person, if they hadn't gotten my signature. So they hadn't gotten it. The question, after it was passed out, and they gave you like thirty seconds to sign it, the question was, "Anyone who has not signed it, raise your hand." Not if there's any questions. "If you have not signed it, raise your hand." So I very cautiously raised my hand, because I'd never--I was a pretty likable fellow, never stood out in a crowd in high school in any sort of capacity. So I cautiously raised my hand, and the sergeants in the back of the room came storming down around me, and just literally embarrassed me. So I quickly signed my name, you know, just to get out of that situation and turned it in. Well, the next week when we were issued our guns, you know the whole situation became clearer to me. We could not call our guns, guns. I had a BB gun, you know, in high school, but this was a weapon, and it was weapon to kill. And that was clear, and that's what we were to call it, and we were holding it for that purpose. Well, as we went through the semester, my moral values became much clearer through these incidents, and I realized I was going to request to be taken -- I wanted to get out of the program. I later found no one had ever tried that before in the college. So I went to talk to the president. He said to write him a letter. So that Thanksgiving I talked to my
father about it, and he suggested I go talk to Shirley Guthrey who was an ethicist at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta. I think it was Christmas holiday, or maybe Thanksgiving, I went to see Shirley. We had a wonderful talk and basically he just was sort of confirming my own feelings, listening to me. So I wrote a letter and was excused from the program. It had to be Christmas, because the height of it came—we had to march in the Christmas parade carrying our weapons. And the discrepancy between doing that and my religion just came into such clear focus. I hardly could make it through the parade, and everybody else was joking about it. My platoon sergeant could tell I was very serious and was distraught. So he began to harass me. When we got back to the campus, he called me forward in front of all the platoons and said that I owed him thirty pushups for not following orders and marching properly, carrying my weapon straight when we were always taught that if your weapon wasn't straight, it was the person behind you who was supposed to tell you to move it, because you weren't supposed to looking up behind you at where your weapon was on your shoulder. So again, I found myself in a conflict situation that I was not trained or accustomed to being in. So I quickly meditated on what I should do and say. So I turned to him very respectfully and said, "Sir, I will be glad to do these thirty pushups you've requested, but I don't feel I've done anything more wrong than anyone else. If my whole platoon will do them with me, I will gladly do them." Later, you know, when I understood what civil disobedience was I understood that was probably my first encounter beyond my parents and family of
that sort of activity, and peers. So he made me stand there while everyone--and he was going to take me in to see the colonel, but the colonel was already in his meeting. So I put my weapon up and went home, and at Christmas the next week, I wrote my letter and was excused from the program through the semester.

I had no support from my friends. They all said, "Oh, you'll never get out. You've got to grin and bear it like we are. It's not going to last but another semester. You can do it. Just come on and quit being so serious and lighten up." But I was excused from the program, and the following year they stopped mandatory ROTC, and second semester more people began to grow their hair long and just disobey all the rules. So I think my example was an example to others. So that's some of the framing that went on about my first experiences of conflict and commitment to my values that led to ostracism and anxiety [laughter] and risk on my part, the development of a sense of courage.

KH: So you decided to take further risks in that area? The ministry was, as you said, a direction of working with people who had been shut out ....?

ML: Right. So your question about Robeson County. It was during those three years, I transferred from Presbyterian College after my third year. I was accepted at Louisville Seminary a year early, and Presbyterian College agreed to give me my degree after one year of seminary. I think they were glad to get rid of me. The other thing is we did start organizing. At the end of my second year, part of my second year in college, I went to
Europe for three months and did a study of the Iona Community in Scotland, which was a radical, religious based community. It was radical in its early years. Anti-war and anti-poverty work in the ghettos of Scotland. They were a group of passivists in World War II, actually. It's called the Iona Community. All these links, because at Iona I learned about Kirkridge Retreat Center in the mountains of Pennsylvania. The founder of that was inspired by his experience at Iona. When I decided to take my pilgrimage and figure out where to go in my life, what to do, the first place I went to was Kirkridge. I went there after coming back from Europe and met the director. John Oliver Nelson just looked at me, and said he could tell my sincerity, and said, "Any time you need to come here, come." And just opened the door. Said, "Any time in your life that you feel you need to be here, call me." So when I decided that I needed to leave seminary after that first year, I called John, and he said, "Come on." So I spent nine months at Kirkridge as an intern. I attended a lot of retreats and workshops. At that point, not only were there religious retreats there, but the whole human potential movement was using the facilities. So during that year I was able to basically get in touch with a lot of my pain and anger and suffering in life, and release it, basically go through a rebirthing process related to the combination of different forms of psychotherapy and spiritual development, meditation and all those things. So after being there a year, it was obvious for me that I could not go back into an educational structure. I needed to synthesize everything that had happened to me at Kirkridge.
KH: Can you say what year this was?

ML: I sent to Kirkridge in the summer of '74, actually it was August, '74 and stayed until May of '75. Well, I didn't tell the--instead of going to seminary a year early, I went to St. Andrews College in Laurinburg for my senior year. Also, I mentioned that we did--and I'm being very cyclical, going back and then weaving back through--but we did a lot of organizing at Presbyterian College in my junior year. And I was sort of destined, actually, to probably become senior of the student body there. We took on the administration on a number of issues. I documented a lot on photography because I was a photographer for the annual book. But I decided since it was my education, I was paying to learn. I didn't want to get in a leadership role and spend all my senior year doing that, instead of learning more, receiving. I felt I'd given enough to that school, and my maturity was greater than its as an institution, and I was ready to leave.

So I went to St. Andrews for a year because I felt I really wanted another college experience before going to seminary. So I got involved at St. Andrews and put on the committee that looked into the hiring of a new chaplain, a new campus minister. He came and I went on to seminary, at Kirkridge, and was coming back through to visit friends at St. Andrews, and went to see the chaplain. He told me about a position in Robeson County as an intern with the Fayetteville Presbytery to explore alternative forms of ministry, related to community and campus work, at Pembroke State University. So that's how I came to Robeson
County, that process. They had tried to find seminary students at the more traditional Presbyterian schools, Union in Richmond, Columbia in Atlanta. They didn't feel they had found one that they felt had the resources needed to manage a pretty non-structured experimental ministry.

So I moved to Pembroke in September of '75 and ended up spending two years in this experimental program. At the end of that time, they hired a full ordained minister, and I went back to seminary and switched seminaries and went to Union Seminary in New York. But during those two years, a lot of things came into focus for me. One major one was that I could not work, I felt that I could not work for the Presbyterian Church in eastern North Carolina because of its history and traditions of segregation and, quite frankly, racism in its relationship to indigenous people, the native people and African American people.

At that time, the white and black Presbyterian churches were segregated, denominationally segregated, not just on a church basis. But it was during that time that I also realized that I'd like to come back when I finished my seminary. It was also during that time that I met my spouse, Donna Chavez, who is Lumbee. This is her home. So we would come back in the summers.

Her background was in mental health and social work, and we met, and our first work together before we began dating was working with a youth group in public housing. She was social worker in a public housing community in Pembroke and directed this new youth program. She actually interviewed me as a person who could help with them on a voluntary basis. So we began working together on
that project, and used the old Presbyterian Church building that was fairly rundown and unused for some of the youth work, because it was near the public housing community.

KH: Were you working with the Camp Lejeune Outreach Program before or during the time the Clergy and Laity Concerned got started?

ML: When we founded that? It was the same time. When I graduated from seminary, we returned in December of '79 with no job and $1,000 in the bank. So we moved in with Donna's mother and our first child was born. Actually she was born eight days or nine days after we came back. Then we actually moved into the home that we were living in that I had rented before we left. We were living together after we'd gotten married before had left three years prior to that. So both Donna and I worked part-time with the North Carolina Hunger Coalition as coordinators of Robeson County. Then I also had a part-time job with Quaker House during military counseling work, particularly beginning the Camp LeJeune Outreach Program. Then we also organized the Robeson County Clergy and Laity Concerned with is now the Center for Community Action.

KH: And who were the organizers for Clergy and Laity Concerned? You and Donna?

ML: Donna and I cofounded it, and in terms of staffing, when we got our first grant which was from -- we got our first few grants from small church sources.

KH: Locally?

ML: No, national church sources. Our first monies came
from the Methodist, the United Presbyterian Church at the time, and the Unitarians.

KH: All out of state?

ML: Yeah. Well, the Methodist and United Presbyterian monies came out of the local support and proposal, and the support of the local churches for the new organization. But it was national money that had been collected in special offerings. So we always had three staff people, one of each race. From the very first moment we had funds for this organization, we always split it three ways. And looking back, you know, over the years, that commitment to multi-racial work, from the very first day funds were received, was a very creative step, which meant, like so many other organizations, we did not have to deal with issues of authority and power and conflict and lack of representation later in relation to employment or participation on staff in leadership roles. So we always had one of the three major races represented on the staff.

KH: We'll get back to that. Let's back up a little bit, and let me ask you what your impressions were of Robeson County the first time you were here. What was your understanding of the conditions here?

ML: Well, I had worked in a mill area in Clinton, South Carolina, when I was at Presbyterian College my first year I was there. That was my first experience with working in a low income community, was in South Carolina. It was a mostly, predominantly white mill area with some black families. So it was actually an integrated mill town for employees of this one mill in Clinton,
outside of Clinton, South Carolina. I worked with the youth, and I learned so much about family structures and the problems of poverty through that experience. So when I moved here years later, and of course I had done other work with farm workers and other groups, one of the first things that struck me here was the breakdown of the family structure and the high number of single parent families, and just the obvious need and desire of the youth to have adult male companionship, both young boys and girls. I mean, it meant more to them for me to be around than food. I mean it was obvious. It was quite an emotional insight for me to wrestle with just what that experience meant to them and the learning that occurred for me through that very simple relationship of being with children.

KH: Where were the men?

ML: Where were the men?

KH: As you understood it?

ML: My flippant response is God knows. I mean, the men just weren't there. The situation was that either they were living together through marriage or other forms of partnership. The parents weren't together at that time. And then even when there are two parents, in this county, because of the type of employment, it usually means that one parent is working a second shift job or third shift job.

KH: ( )

ML: Well, no, just even locally. But then a lot of the construction people do leave for a week at the time and aren't there during the week. But we just have a high number of basic,
just single parent homes here. In fact, recent statistics are that they're more children born in single parent homes than not in Robeson County. So that was one of the clear experiences for me that spoke to a symptom of poverty and the pain of poverty.

The race relations were obviously serious and many barriers stood between people of each race. And it was also clear to me early on the economic barriers within each race, which is still a serious issue, and that people do not discuss very often. And it plays itself.

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ML: The diversity of income within each culture or racial group is very wide in this county. And the role of the church [laughter] in this county is very different in each racial group. And even though Pembroke State was founded as the first state supported school for Indian people in the country, it was obvious to me that the power and authority of Indian people in the university had been totally eroded through the result of the process of integration and becoming part of the state university system. So the town and gown barriers that you find traditionally in any small, rural, southern community that has a university or college was evident, even though this college came out of an indigenous effort and support, and provided the source for the first Indian teachers and Indian education. So those were some of the things that were obvious to me. And the labor situation here, the level of low wages and low benefits, and basically the more I learned about Third World conditions, the more I saw how the patterns of power and wealth and poverty here are what we used to call Third World patterns. The quantity is different because there is more money here, but the patterns and power relationships and the high level of poverty and violence and other signs are clear.

KH: Can you talk a little bit about the race relations you noticed here when you first arrived? To what degree did people in the Indian community deal with people in the black community, African-American community? Among those two communities what kinds of relations were going on?
ML: Well, it was obvious to me when I first moved here that Lumberton was not only the county seat, but that also meant it was the seat of power. We lived outside of Lumberton, and particularly in the Indian and black community, it was really seen as the seat of power and oppression, and interpreted that way often in comments. The most common comment was look at the new courthouse in Lumberton and you know it was built on the backs of Indian and black people. That was the most obvious comment that was recurring to me about one clear measure of victimization that people felt and experienced. So the history of race relations as a colonized community, colonized area, I think, you know, we're not taught in North Carolina that this was the first place where the cultures, the European culture and the indigenous culture and the African culture, came together through the development of the ports and colonized areas in the South. What it meant was that the indigenous people here have had to struggle for much longer under European control and domination than say the western indigenous nations. Some of the last major "Indian wars" were just fought in the west a hundred years ago, whereas here it's been four hundred years of relationships, mostly destructive in terms of recognition and respect for indigenous and African cultures. But what that whole history has meant, of course, is it created a system of dependency and, of course, power was totally centered in the hands of the whites. So the Indian and black populations were set against each other in a sort of competitive arrangement. It was clear to you that if you wanted anything it was "the white man" who had it. So if
you were going to get it, you got to relate to him. So it was very much a top-down relationship, and the idea of joining forces together, at least when I moved here in the '70s, was not accepted. The only place it was talked about was among professionals for electoral reasons of getting people elected. But then it happened on a level of the community that was on the professional level. And the leadership....

KH: Whites?

ML: No. I mean blacks and Indians talked about making a coalition, and there were a few successful coalitions, but they weren't sustained. They had a clear task.

KH: A goal?

ML: Which was to elect people to office. So there was not a sustained, long-term organization of people to address these issues across race and class lines. A lot of the social action had been fairly reactive, where if you could not negotiate and obtain policy changes and those doors were closed, you went to litigation -- you went to the courts for remedy. Of course, the remedy of the legal system is not empowering for the majority of people, even though it may change a few things now and then. It was not empowering for a large number of people. Also, the system of compromise when I moved here was so strong that people felt like the only way to get anything was to compromise almost everything to get a little piece of what they could get. So there was not a sense of power among the black and Indian communities that either alone or together they could somehow change the conditions. And if there was a sense of that, there
was a sense that it could never be done because it had maybe been tried before and failed, and the system was just too tight. The political system was just too controlled and too tight for that to happen. And it was clear that in Robeson County it not only included wealth, but included the structures of law enforcement and the court system as playing a key role in continued domination, and not just the industrialization that came in, and outside ownership. But basically the struggle against the family structure of land ownership and the political structure within the court and law enforcement and locally owned factories proved to be the major reasons for the lack of political and economic opportunity.

KH: Okay, well, to what degree did these conditions you were just talking about play into your ideas, yours and Donna's ideas, about the formation of Clergy and Laity Concerned? Can you speak about that?

ML: Yeah, and I always add that that's the former name of the Center for Community Action. In fact, we usually, just to save complications, we just say founded the Center for Community Action formerly Robeson County Clergy and Laity Concerned, but from a historical perspective it was first called Robeson County Clergy and Laity Concerned.

KH: And the name changed in what year?

ML: I'd have to check that, but I think it was about '87. Donna's background in social work and mental health led to her understanding. She had the hope that social work would be more comprehensive and address more of the critical problems, the
problems of human need, in the county that were not addressed through a more individualistic approach of mental health. She found in her social work experience that it too had its limitations. So as we began to talk about the possibility of forming a community based organization where people would come together to talk, discuss, and plan, and act together across race lines and economic lines that that interest began to develop. She also had participated in some of the anti-war activities that did happen here in Robeson County, and developed a high level of critical thinking through her family experience and particularly the role of her father who would sit them down to watch the news and talk about it, and read the newspaper together, and discuss issues together. Donna, as we say, took a liking to that and really learned a tremendous amount about social and cultural awareness through that process.

And the more people we talked to about the issue of forming an organization to address some of the causes of poverty and hunger in the county, the more excited they were about it. The Robeson County Church and Community Center, which was founded by Bob Magnum, a white Methodist minister here, in its early years did voter registration work, and took on some of the issues of disparity and inequality. But over the years the Church and Community Center transitioned towards a more public assistance and direct service and housing and literacy program and organization. So its use of advocacy became some more centered on the individual than on institutional change. With that, it was clear that the need would be to start an organization whose
purpose was to compliment all the work that was being done related to human need and human services, with a program that dealt with institutional change and empowerment. So that's why the Center was formed, to do that, this Center, which had another name at one time [laughter].

KH: And hunger was the first issue you tackled, is that correct?

ML: Well, hunger and poverty. We always put the two together. Now, I would change them around and say poverty and hunger, but because of the implications and the difficulty in our society about talking about issues of injustice to this very day, talking about hunger, you know, was something acceptable in the religious community and even in the government community as long as the strategies did not challenge the relationships of power and authority in the community.

KH: Was that a conscious strategy in 1980?

ML: Well, yes, because, I think, in any social change process, you have to start where people are, and language is one place where you start. The whole process of organizing people and empowerment, you can either get too far beyond, above, below [laughter] people that you'll miss the effective approach. I think that's one of the serious problems which may be far beyond this one interview, is the issue and problems of ideology among social change groups and the use of ideology and ideological language. So we made a philosophical decision early on that we would try to use language that people understood and related to in the process of organizing for social change. And hunger and
poverty, more so than the word even "justice", justice is a phase that, in this community, when we first organized, really implied, you know, the court system, not a sense of relationships between people. It was clearly, when you said justice, it meant what you did or didn't get in the court, and if you said law, it meant the police. The law is the police! That equivalent language was real descriptive of the reality. That law enforcement was the law because the experience was that they took the law into their own hands. So there was no written law. The only law that people experienced was "the law," which was the one's that came to your house or met you on the street, and usually in a conflictual relationship. So language, we were real conscious about the language which we used to describe our work and tried to frame it in ways that were based on the people's own language.

KH: So hunger was the major topic area at first, the major work that you did? Can you explain first the conditions of hunger and malnutrition in Robeson County and then describe the first couple of activities that the Center for Community Action did?

ML: Well, there's always been a high level of unemployment in Robeson County, but greater than that is the level of underemployment, of people who are working full-time but whose wages basically keep them in poverty. And based on the last statistic that we've been able to find on underemployment in North Carolina, which was in 1978, Robeson County had the highest level. I think it's interesting that the state no longer keeps that statistic. Since we have the lowest wages in the country,
we're number one in underemployment in the country, that statistic is no longer available on the county-by-county level that we're able to find in all the data that's collected in North Carolina. But last government data that we've been able to find from '78, through a study that the Council of Government released, no, it was actually someone in state government, Robeson County had 28% underemployment, which meant the 28% of all the work force that were heads of households, their wages kept them below the poverty level. So the hunger here and the levels of malnutrition aren't seen if you walk down the street. But they're seen in the lack of economic security whether you're unemployed or underemployed or elderly or a child. They're seen in all the health related problems that we have here. They're seen in the level of frustration and violence that is rampant in the county. We also have the highest level of violence in the state here in Robeson County, mostly, of course, between people who know each other, but a direct result of this sense of powerlessness and lack of opportunity.

KH: And in 1990, this is true just as much now?

ML: Yeah, and it was clear at that point, and still is today, that the delivery of public assistance was a major problem, and that was one of our first issues that we addressed.

KH: Can you explain how that was addressed and just what you did or who did it and how it was done?

ML: Well, we organized a coalition of organizations. We had about eight or ten together at that time.

KH: Can you name them?
ML: Oh, I couldn't name all the partners, but we had our Clergy and Laity Concerned group. We also had the Hunger Coalition involved because Donna and I were also working with the Hunger Coalition, which they had a lot of state resources to bring to our training. We had the Lumbee River Legal Services which was new at the time, and Julian Pierce was on our committee. We had the North Carolina Clients Council, which was attached to Legal Services, a Robeson County branch of North Carolina Clients Council. We had public housing communities involved, and the leadership in some of the government positions in public housing in the Four County Community Services Organization, the Robeson County Church and Community Center, people who worked with the elderly through government and private programs, the churches. Those were the main coalition groups.

We decided to interview these food stamp recipients because we had heard--we had one food stamp Office in the whole county. At that time you had to go there to be certified, recertified, and to get your stamps. One of the results of that was a mailing process was set up. And this county in the largest county in the state. It's three-fourths the size of the state of Rhode Island, with one food stamp office. So it was obvious that the delivery of services was not a priority. We started getting a lot of complaints about people having to be recertified prematurely in an unusually repetitive pattern, I mean, a very frequent pattern of being recertified. And people could not afford to drive and come back and forth. Sometimes they had to pay 10 dollars to come, and food stamps were just 40 or 50 dollars. You had to do
this every few months. It just wasn't worth it. So the policy and practice of recertification in our local department was being used as a disincentive for people to sign up for the program.

So we set up research and interviews of people at the office, and basically that's what the research showed. So we made recommendations that the Recertification Program be changed to be consistent with federal law because it was obvious that the policy and practice was breaking the law. And it was changed by the department. That led to the first of many ongoing policy and practice issues related to our Department of Social Services here which continues to have problems in its competent delivery of services, not necessarily because of the employees that work there that have no control over the decision making process.

KH: How would you describe those early efforts in addressing issues about food stamps?

ML: Then we went on to investigate and expose the fact hundreds of thousands of dollars were being turned in, back to the state, unused energy assistance money for the poor. That led to a tremendous crisis at the department, a restructuring of board committees and personnel committees, and many people were hoping at that time that it would force the removal of the director, which it did not. But over those first five years, we did a lot of work on public assistance programs. We did a land ownership study, in collaboration with the Lumbee Regional Development Association. We did major educational conferences on land and employment issues and on the court system. We did major research on the court system and began advocating in 1983 for a
public defender system here in Robeson County, and identified the major areas of abusive power in the court system here. And all of those activities were fairly energizing and motivating to the constituencies that were negatively impacted by those practices and policies. What we found is that people had a real issue that concerned them and once the issue was either resolved or significant change could not be obtained, their motivation was clearly limited to a particular issue. So that led us to reflect on how to organize the organization, and we spent two years in consultation with the Center for Community Change in Washington, D.C.

KH: When you say we, can you name the individuals?
ML: The Center, the individuals?
KH: Yeah.
ML: Well, it was the board and staff that worked with, Garland Yates was the consultant with the Center for Community Change.

KH: And at the Center for Community Action it was, the staff and board here?
ML: Yeah. And through that process we shifted our whole way of organizing into a community based model of the cluster group model that we developed. Then the issues surfaced through those clusters which are made up of people who know each other and are based in different towns or areas of the county. Prior to that, the committees and members were very much more issue oriented rather than community oriented.

KH: County wide issue oriented?
ML: Yeah, so if we had a membership meeting and 50 people came, you might only know five or six of those people, and it became very hard to organize -- a lot of resources went into organizing those meetings because of the size of the county, the presence of four separate phone districts in the county that still remain but are being merged. So we began to move toward the cluster model of community-based organization and in committees that were multi-cluster committees that addressed county-wide and state or national issues. And we assigned organizers to work with the cluster groups, mostly based on their prior work with the membership and the racial makeup of the cluster groups. So our structure changed. That led to further empowerment and to a real growth of the organization and its membership, its issues, its programs.

KH: And the cluster groups came along in around '85?
ML: Well, we started developing them in '86.

KH: Let's stop here. <Break for lunch>

KH: Okay, we're back, and we were talking about CCA's earliest efforts around issues of hunger and the strategy there and the thinking at that time. What led CCA to move into issues around the courts and the criminal justice system? What prompted that shift in direction?

ML: Well, it really wasn't a shift in direction. We spent three years identifying the major, institutional causes of hunger and poverty in the county. During those first three years we were also beginning to address some of those. So the issues of
public assistance were alarming and obvious. So that was one of the first issues that people wanted to address. So the other three issues, the other three institutional barriers and causes of poverty and hunger that we identified were the court and law enforcement systems, land use, land ownership and environment, environmental protection, and public education. There was five actually, public education. The fourth was employment and economic development, and the fifth was public assistance. So it was one of five that were identified during that three-year process of reflection and discussion and research on the root causes of hunger and poverty in the county. Court and law enforcement policies and practices obviously victimized people and directly related to your poverty and your hunger. For example, if you were arrested and the magistrate that you went before placed you under a secured bond, even though you may not have a record and were a good citizen and the law said that you should have been placed under an unsecured bond, if you were placed under the secured bond and had to spend 15 or 20 or 30 days in jail prior to your court, then you lose your job. We found that the use of the bail bond system, in our research, was one of the direct ways that legal practices and policies impacted on the economic and social stability of families and individuals. So there was a direct correlation between the lack of equitable treatment and the lack of equitable treatment and the lack of opportunity for fair and just treatment in the court system. So that's why we began basically to address all of those areas and set up projects related to each of those five areas. Sometimes
the projects were clear and had their own funding, and sometimes they were issues that were combined in a larger framework of a project.

KH: Can you name some of those projects?

ML: Well, we started out with a fair employment project and a legal justice project. In 1983 when the office opened, those were our first major projects, and as I shared earlier, those projects were highly successful in organizing people and addressing issues of private and public practice and policies.

KH: Mueller Steam was part of that?

ML: Well, yes. We were asked to get involved in the Mueller Steam labor campaign and actually were requested, our resources, following the successful vote for unionization at the plant because actually the problems didn't occur until after the employees decided and voted successfully to unionize, and then they began getting fired and terminated and harassed. So we did a report on the conditions and the practices and supported the right of the employees to organize. Eventually we had to even advocate, to try and persuade the labor union to see the campaign as a legitimate effort. Because the numbers of the employees were so small at the plant, eventually when the company hired a corporate, union busting law firm and put in more resources than the union was committed to putting in, that it basically died and the union was never formally developed. That's one example.

We worked with a lot of other fair employment practices on an individual basis with wrongful discharge and denial of promotions and toxic exposure in the workplace. Issues like that
that we still work on today. But we're just now beginning to look at the strategies to address the economic conditions in a more planned and structured and creative way. It was clear that what we needed to learn first as an organization, and people in the community needed to learn, was how to access political opportunity. And that was an intentional decision through our work to shift, not shift but to narrow the focus to access to political opportunity. And through that experience of learning how to access political opportunity, we would then turn our attention toward the more complex issues of the lack of economic opportunity, which are at the heart of the causes of hunger and poverty. So during the 1990's we will be developing new and creative strategies to do that. We have done some of that in the past but not in a comprehensive way because we realized that without access to political opportunity there would never be access to economic opportunity. And the major issues of access to political opportunity have been decided, and have been very successful, and took basically eleven years.

KH: Can you describe those activities?
ML: Okay, related to the....
KH: In the early '80s.
ML: Well, it was clear that with the legal system that we needed a public defender office. The only way to have a balanced advocacy and adversarial system was to raise the capacity of advocacy on the part of indigent people and indigent defendants, because the court-appointed system which is dominant in North Carolina does not really serve the needs and interests of low
income people. Hardly any attorney will risk a lot of negotiating chips with the prosecutorial office for low income people who are not large income generators for their work, and particularly when there is a strong political system and court system that has to be negotiated on a regular basis. So that campaign to establish a public defender system took six years and a lot of collaborative work.

KH: Other groups were involved in that issue as well?
ML: Right.
KH: What was CCA's role?
ML: We were really the stimulus and motivator and provided the framework for the effort, and then other voluntary organizations, and eventually the North Carolina Commission on Indian Affairs became involved in advocating for the office as well. So that's one example which led to a specific shift in power. So now within the court system here we have more balance of power, and the public defender office presents us with a voice for equity, involving legal issues. For example, our public defender, Angus Thompson, serves on the merged school board. Was elected to the merged school board. So the importance of the freedom that that position brings, at least at the present time, the voice that it brings to the community, goes far beyond the office itself.

In terms of the issues of representative government, it was obvious that there was not equitable representation in the county, in the school systems, and in the board of commissioners or the county commissioners. So campaigns were begun, all of
which have been collaborative campaigns to merge the five school systems that we have in this county and also to redistrict the county based on the 1990 census, to provide equitable representation on that board. So with the successful merger of the five systems into one system, in March 1988 we now have equitable financing in the schools. We now have a structured educational program, equitable program offerings in all the schools across the board, and we have the establishment of the first governing body in the history of the county with equitable representation of the three major races.

KH: The school board?

ML: The school board was the first, which mean for the first time the majority of a local governing body is Native American and African American, and that was in 1988. KH: Well, can you talk about the specific things that CCA did to sort of act as a catalyst for that change?

ML: All right, at the same time we were organizing our clusters, and people were involved in neighborhood issues, county-wide issues that we've discussed, the membership was learning how to access social and political opportunity and develop a voice and learn to make proposals to decision makers, negotiate with them, and stand up for what they believed was rightfully due them in our democracy, as well as the sense of moral responsibility developed and grew. So all this was happening at the same time we engaged in two major environmental campaigns, both of which were successful, and were the most multi-cultural campaigns that we were doing.
KH: That's GSX.

ML: GSX and US Ecology, two major corporations chose this area of North Carolina as sites for their proposed regional facilities, and both would have severely impacted Robeson County, and within five miles of our county line. But it's interesting that neither of which were sited here, but both would have severely impacted our communities. So we facilitated the organization, of particularly the GSX campaign in the county, and then worked in collaboration on that campaign with other organizations and other counties and with U.S. Ecology, we worked in a collaborative framework with organizations here and in other neighboring counties. But all of those activities generated a significant rise in citizen participation in the democratic process in this county. It was historical, and people began to understand and recognize their own power, and their ability to impact and change, not only policies, but actual structures. So it wasn't just an issue of reform. It really was an issue of major structural change in Robeson County. At the same time the Center has struggled to also be a base for the dialogue of values reflection, which is key. Because once we have access to opportunity, the critical issue will become the values which people bring to their participation, and the conflict of values that are represented in the community.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW