**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH**

**ROBIN WHITE LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS**

**MAY 8, 2020**

INTERVIEWED BY DEBORAH HARVEY

AUDIO FILE #BRVB050820 – ROBIN WHITE

# EDITORIAL NOTE

This document is a rendering of the oral history interview as transcribed by the interviewer from the audio recording. Although effort was made to provide a verbatim transcription, for easier reading of the transcript, verbal pauses, repetitions of words, and encouraging words from the interviewer were omitted. The resulting oral history interview transcript was provided to the informant for review and, if necessary, correction. Ms. White made significant modifications to the draft transcript. For the original interview, please refer to the audio file.

# ABSTRACT

Ms. Robin White begins by describing her career with the National Park Service beginning in 1982. She recounts how she came to be the Chief of Interpretation at Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. Ms. White describes the relationship of the site with the Brown Foundation during her tenure. She offers her opinion of how the immediate community and the Topeka community in general felt about the establishment of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in their midst. Ms. White describes the development of the General Management Plan and of the Strategic Plan following that. She discusses the various educational outreach efforts and some of the partnerships she helped to develop for the site. Ms. White also describes the Dedication in 2004, which she attended.

# PERSONS MENTIONED

[Chicago] Mayor Harold Washington, Ellis Marsalis, Germaine Bazzle, Harold Batiste, Alvin Batiste, the Storyville Stompers, Mardi Gras Indians, The Neville Brothers, Trombone Shorty, Donald Harrison, Wynton Marsalis, Nicholas Payton, Ervin Mayfield, Charmaine Neville, Superintendent Ray Harper, Cheryl [Brown Henderson], Barbara Johns, Vernon Johns, Sharon Robinson, Jackie Robinson, [Gary, Indiana] Mayor[Thomas V.] Barns, Charles Scott, John Scott, Charles Bledsoe, Lucinda Todd, Senator [Robert] Dole, Rachel Franklin Weekley, Treva Sykes, Teri Perry Gage, Katherine [Cushinberry], Alicia Bullocks, Charles Hamilton Houston, [Thurgood] Marshall, Jack Greenberg, Oliver Hill, the Little Rock Nine, Ernest Green, Treopia Green, [President George W.] Bush, Ruby Bridges, [National Park Service] Director Fran [Mainella].

Robin White, 2020

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

**ROBIN WHITE**

Interviewer: Okay, looks like I’m recording. This oral history interview is for the Administrative History of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. The interviewer is Deborah Harvey, with Outside The Box, on behalf of the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service. Interviewed today is Ms. Robin White, former Chief of Interpretation at Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site and currently superintendent at Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site. The date is May 8, [2020]. The interview takes place at the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site Visitor Center.

So, Ms. White, I’m – as I’m sure you know, the purpose of an Administrative History is to document the development of a unit of the National Park Service, both physically and administratively. Oral histories are one way to get information that might not otherwise be available from documentary evidence. We do try to get as much information as we can from as many different perspectives as possible in order to craft a robust narrative of the developmental history of the park. This information will be used by future park administrators to inform their decisions as they navigate future developments.

However, I should inform you that not all the information we gather will be included in the final Administrative History, but it will be in your transcript. That – I do want to say that we appreciate that you are giving your time to share your experiences of the development of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site to further this project.

So, to start with, we’re – I’m going to have to ask you to state your name and spell your last name, please.

White: My name is Robin White, W-H-I-T-E.

Interviewer: Okay. You may have to speak louder because of the distance to the recording device. White: Yes, ma’am.

Interviewer: Okay. So, the first thing we want to do is review your career with the National Park Service, and then we’ll go on to the time that you spent at Brown v. Board. So, when did you start at the National Park Service?

White: My career began in 1982 at Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. I began as a park aide, and, from park aide to urban coordinator to volunteer coordinator to a park ranger and weekend supervisor.

Interviewer: And this was all at Indiana Dunes?

White: This was all at Indiana Dunes. I was there ten years, and we started the Urban Transportation Reimbursement Program for groups throughout northwest Indiana, and we included Chicago, Illinois, to introduce them to environmental education. We developed a partnership with the late Mayor Harold Washington’s Chicago gang intervention network. I was a cross-country ski instructor for ten years and taught groups to cross-country ski and, actually, just introducing them to the environment. By – I guess, by default, I became seriously invested in environmental education as a Park Ranger.

Interviewer: Ranger?

White: Definitely! Environmental education – and I loved it! It became a significant part of me because Indiana Dunes was actually the launching of my career, whereas I could go to Pin Hook Bog and – you know, where there are carnivorous plants in the bog, there’s no oxygen, and you’re on sphagnum moss. Or, at Chellberg Farm – oh, shoveling manure and talking about the animals there, and taking care of the horses and the goats, and actually chopping down sorghum and making sorghum molasses or tapping maple sugar trees and making maple syrup.

Interviewer: In Indiana? Wow!

White: At Indiana Dunes, yes. So, all of those things I’m exposed to and taking that with me.

After Indiana Dunes, I relocated to Petroglyph National Monument in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Interviewer: Okay, when did you go there?

White: I went there – I believe it was in 1991, because that was the year around the time of my Freeman Tilden Award. I relocated to Brown v. Board after Petroglyph. I worked with the Five Sandoval Indian Pueblos in Albuquerque. I also worked with the southern Ute, Ignacio, Colorado, as they annually requested and sent for me to spend a week on the reservation and work with their youth in the school on cultural and environmental education programs and engaged the community in the evenings. I worked all over the state of New Mexico in partnership with U.S. Game and Fish and their Project Wild and Project Learning Tree programs – U.S. Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service. I shared through collaborative programs and workshops on civic engagement. They, in turn, provided resources for me as we worked with diverse groups. All of these organizations partnered with me and the National Park Service in exploring civic/community engagement, working in urban and rural environments, and participated in career fairs at local schools. So, from there, I relocated to Brown v.

Board, and I was ready because I participated in the planning and standing Petroglyph National Monument as a new park.

Interviewer: Okay. And that was in about 1996?

White: Yes. And, actually, I arrived there just when the symposium – Brown v. Board symposium – so, it was in May.

Interviewer: In May, right before the symposium?

White: Right – yeah, right before the symposium, I arrived there.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, we’re going to get to your work at Brown v. Board, so, let’s skip over that for now and talk about where you went after Brown v. Board.

White: After Brown v. Board, I relocated to New Orleans Jazz National Historic Park. And that – what is interesting is, at Brown v. Board and New Orleans Jazz, I helped to develop/ stand up those parks, but, in New Orleans Jazz, we developed a partnership with Amtrak, and we had students teaching jazz on the Amtrak, going back and forth to Chicago from Wednesday to Friday. We had a partnership with the Drake Hotel through Amtrak and lodged there. We presented the New Orleans Jazz Concert to the public for free every Saturday throughout the summer. Jazz artists included Ellis Marsalis, Germaine Bazzle, Harold Batiste, Alvin Batiste, the Storyville Stompers, Mardi Gras Indians, The Neville Brothers, Trombone Shorty, and Donald Harrison. All of those renown musicians performed in Louis Armstrong Park and just teaching the fundamentals of jazz and just – the music just rockin’ the city. So, we did that for a while and hosted summer jazz camps with Wynton Marsalis and Nicholas Payton, Ervin Mayfield, Charmaine Neville, and other artists. From there, I went up to Brown v.

Board. So, I was actually the Chief of Interp at New Orleans Jazz, as well, and then, at Petroglyph National Monument, I was - I was the Education Environmental Specialist.

Interviewer: Okay. And then, from the Jazz, you came here, to –?

White: No, from Jazz, I went to Grand Canyon, and I was at Grand Canyon for seven years as a supervisory park ranger on the South Rim. And, from Grand Canyon, I went to William Howard Taft National Historic Site for three years, and then I ended up here.

Interviewer: Okay. At Little Rock Central High School?

White: Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site. I arrived here in August of 2008. Interviewer: Okay. And you’ve been here ever since?

White: I’ve been here ever since, and, actually, looking at how we can instill history into the consciousness of the community and developing partnerships, and really, like, initiating innovative programs, but more so, then, affording the community the opportunity to own these programs and empowering the community, create and share their narratives.

Interviewer: Okay. And so, let’s talk about your heading to Brown v. Board. How did that happen? Did you apply for that position, or did somebody call you up and say, “We need you there?”

White: Oh, yes. The same here, I was called and requested to manage this park. And, yes –I have been requested by the Superintendent of the park or the Regional Director.

Interviewer: Right. Who called you?

White: I received a call from the superintendent.

Interviewer: Who was –?

White: It was Ray Harper, and, at the time, my forte was, and still is, bringing people together, even those that don’t like each other. I have – I have that talent to work with both advocates and adversaries, in letting people know that we don’t own a park. We’re the facilitators, so this is your baby, and we are affording you the opportunity to take part in this. And so, I was called out to help in the community at Brown v. Board.

Interviewer: Okay, and so do you remember what Ray Harper said to you when he called you up and said, “Would you come to Brown v. Board?”

White: (Pause) He asked me – yeah, I do remember. He asked me do I like to write. I said, “Yes.” And he said, “I’ve been reading some of your writing.” And I said, “Okay.” And he told me that I was very passionate, and the Park Service is not crazy about passionate writing.” (Laughter) And so – but, he said that he liked it, how I described things, and that there would be a newsletter coming along, and would I be interested in that?

Would I be interested in helping to spearhead some of the projects in the community or just bringing the community together?

Interviewer: So, did you go to Brown v. Board as the Chief of Interpretation?

White: Yes, I went to Brown v. Board as the Chief of Interpretation – from Albuquerque Education Specialist to Chief of Interpretation, yes.

Interviewer: And when you got there, what was your first impression of the park? Had you seen it before?

White: No, I had not seen it before.

Interviewer: Okay. So, at that time, it hadn’t – it was in its infancy, in need of restoration, and the offices were in the old Post Office building. What did you think about that arrangement?

White: Yes. I was kind of used to it. (Laughter) I was kind of used to lease facilities until your facility is ready. The Park Service does that a lot. And the – there was some history there at the postal office, and we had a good relationship with them, the Post Master and some of the lawyers. This afforded us the opportunity to network throughout. And so, I thought that was pretty cool, because we actually – for a little bit, we were in the center of everything, you know. We were in the center of downtown, and I kind of liked that.

Interviewer: Okay. So, how did that – how did that work with interpreting the building?

White: Well, we weren’t interpreting the building as it wasn’t ready. We were developing partnerships or going into the schools in Topeka, Lawrence, Hays, and Manhattan, Kansas, to outreach. But, more than anything, we were looking at curriculum, exhibits – temporary, okay? So, I was writing grants to secure funding for exhibits to use in the communities

Interviewer: Okay, and those were going to be in the Post Office – the temporary exhibits? White: Yes. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. What did – did you make any arrangements for, like, traveling exhibits? White: No, Cheryl – the Brown Foundation –

Interviewer: Oh, they did –?

White: They were doing that part, yes. Because we collaborated, and they agreed to do one component, as we agreed to do another component. Because we would write grants, like Parks as Classrooms, and receive the funding from them to do specific projects, and then they would raise funds – or, however they would get theirs – they would do specific projects. I don’t want to suggest they only raised funds, because they wrote grants as well. Cheryl was very talented.

Interviewer: Okay. I am interested in how that cooperation worked with the Brown Foundation. When you had – did you get together and decide on an outreach method and then discuss – and then divvy up who did what, or did the Park Service decide what the outreach method would be and then consult with the Brown Foundation about how they could help with that effort?

White: It was a mixture. When I arrived there, the partnership was already developed. It was, like, a five-year partnership. Ray and myself and Cheryl had a pretty good relationship, so we kept each other informed of what we were doing, and, when Cheryl was traveling out of town, she would keep us informed, or sometimes we would travel with her. Or, when we were doing projects, she would be involved with us, as well. We collaborated on symposiums. We had events at Howard University or Washburn University. And we hosted events throughout – we partnered and hosted a civil rights symposium at Southern University in Baton Rouge, and that was a partnership Cheryl spearheaded.

She had a larger network of partnerships than we, and she shared her resources with us.

Interviewer: Right. And she had already made all those connections?

White: Yes. And so, she was introducing us to her connections and networking and made sure that we weren’t left out. So, Cheryl was, at that time, very inclusive, and we were – joined the same team, being inclusive with her, as well.

Interviewer: And so, did the Brown Foundation – I understand that they wrote some curriculum guides?

White: They did. They did.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you – did they just write them on their own, or did you – I mean, I know that they were funded by the park –

White: They were funded, as were we, by different resources. Yeah, we looked at them, and, actually shared curriculum development resources in Hays, Manhattan, Lawrence, and Topeka, Kansas Universities. It went well. They were used in the classrooms, and other resources used them as well

Interviewer: And did they use them just in the vicinity, Topeka, or in the region or around the country?

White: No, no. It was throughout the country. It was throughout the country, definitely, yeah. Interviewer: Oh, okay. And they put out a newsletter?

White: Yes.

Interviewer: Were you involved with that at all? Or do you – did you do your own newsletter?

White: Well, sometimes – no, we had our own newsletter, and then, sometimes, Cheryl might ask me to write an article, or Ray might write an article. Now, he was a greater writer. It was according to how busy we were and what we were working on, but we always made ourselves available to support each other.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you think back and think of any, like, specific projects that you worked on in regard to interpretation – that you worked on either by yourself or in cooperation with the Brown Foundation?

White: Most of the projects were in cooperation with the Brown Foundation, such as the symposium at Howard University that was on Plessy v. Ferguson. They participated with us in working on the GMP in different parts of the country--at Jimmy Carter NHS, or the Civil Rights Museum in Alabama, or the Atlanta or Midwest Regional Office.

Interviewer: Right. But it was about civil rights, so –?

White: Yes, exactly. And so, she – we were hosting programs around the country on civil rights. We were also discussing all the cases, because people weren’t familiar that there were eleven cases or was it eleven families? They weren’t familiar with Delaware, South Carolina, Virginia, and the District of Columbia plaintiffs. We would take a trip up to Delaware and interview people. We met with attorney Oliver Reed, before he crossed over; we had the opportunity to interview him. So, we were actually gathering resources and making our networks wider – just creating stronger partnerships throughout. And so, Cheryl was making sure that we knew the individuals from each of those cases were aware of us.

Interviewer: Okay. She already knew them?

White: She already knew them, and she was making sure that we knew them. Some of our time in the beginning was spent in traveling to learn about the individuals, or they would visit with us for interviews or talk with the youth in the school and in the community, but we reached out on our own. We got to meet – let me see – descendants of [unintelligible] like Barbara Johns. I had learned about her before my arrival to Brown. I really admired her and would have loved to have a conversation about her role in the Children’s Walk Out in Farmington, Virginia, before she crossed over. I learned about Barbara Johns through learning the history of her uncle, Vernon Johns, who was before Dr. King. We collaborated on projects and brought in Sharon Robinson, Jackie Robinson’s daughter. We split up the budget costs for guest speakers, for example. The park might pick up lodging or travel; the Brown Foundation might focus totally on youth and present a youth program. And so, we worked on March for Parks together. We did – of course –

Interviewer: You worked on March for Parks? Okay.

White: Yes. March for Parks – that was initiated, actually, by Superintendent Ray. He initiated the program at the site. Of course, we did National Park Week, but then we were also initiating environmental education and civil rights programs. We presented outreach programs in specific communities with UK, in Lawrence, Kansas, or in Manhattan at KSU and of course at Washburn in Topeka, Kansas, you know. I felt like we had a good foundation, and we started off really good because they also worked on Cooperative Agreements and MOUs with us.

Interviewer: Okay. When you first started there, did you receive any kind of training from the National Park Service, or did they just say, “Here, go do this?” Or did you feel like you didn’t need training? (Laughs)

White: Well, no, as far as training, I was already prepared to work with people in the community because that was my background. Although my degree at that time was in Criminal Justice, I had cases in History, American History and Black History. I worked with the late Mayor Harold Washington of Chicago, and I worked with Mayor Barns in Gary, Indiana, so I was already really working with politicians as well but at different levels, of course. But I was already doing that. And then, in working with different groups that had conflicts with each other – I’d been raised in bringing in rival gangs and bringing them together for about five or six years at Indiana Dunes. So, I had conflict management skills. So, I already had that. I had research skills.

Interviewer: Yes. So, research and writing skills. So, basically, you acquired those – White: And working with people.

Interviewer: Yeah. You acquired all those in your previous assignments?

White: Yes. I did. I did, and on my on journey of development. Because, basically, it’s about empowering people and people feeling comfortable with whom they are, for them to feel comfortable with you. It’s important to work with both advocates and adversaries.

Interviewer: Okay. What did you feel – how did you feel that the community felt about the park? Let’s start with the community at large, Topeka, as a town, and then the immediately surrounding community, because, as you know, the immediately surrounding community of a brand-new park is not always thrilled. So, what –?

White: There was – there was pushback, and there was not a lot of support in the community because people felt like they were left out.

Interviewer: In the immediate community or the larger community?

White: In the immediate community, people felt like they were left out. So, it was our responsibility to be inclusive and to start bringing people together.

Interviewer: Did they feel like they were left out of the decision-making process? I mean, the – White: Telling the story, the decision-making process, families involved, families left out –

Interviewer: Oh, telling the story. Okay. Or just anything? (laughter)

White: You know, because – oh, I forget their names, but there were three strong families in Topeka. They wanted to sue the local NAACP lawyers, Charles and John Scott and Charles Bledsoe, and of course Lucinda Todd as one of the plaintiffs, because she was known as a community activist as well. There were quite a number of family plaintiffs, and I really don’t think Cheryl was intentionally leaving anyone out. Sometimes, Cheryl and others bumped heads, and that would last until people engage to gain a greater understanding.

Interviewer: Right. So, as I understand it, most of that immediate community was either commercial or non-homeowning residents. Is that accurate, at that time?

White: And a lot of – I don’t want to say eminent domain, but a lot of people lost property. Interviewer: People lost property to the park?

White: No. In losing – in the community, people were losing property. I won’t say lost property to the park. No, I wouldn’t say that.

Interviewer: To the city?

White: To the city. And then, far as commercial, I can’t speak on that.

Interviewer: Well, it looks like there are some – okay. It looks like there are some commercial buildings close to the –

White: It is still there, yeah.

Interviewer: That is still there. Matter of fact, that’s pretty much all you see when you come into the park, is, you see all those commercial buildings. I guess the residential part is behind – someplace behind Monroe School?

White: It’s further out. And I don’t know what role the commercials wanted to play, but they weren’t involved as they should have been. Or –

Interviewer: Okay. Nobody asked them what role they wanted to play, I guess?

White: There were some mixed feelings, and of course in telling such a story, some people didn’t’ feel good about it.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, as I understand it, at the time that the building was purchased, it was sort of a commercial building because it was being used as storage – a storage building for somebody – some company?

White: I think they were getting ready to scrap it, and Cheryl saved that building. She came to the rescue for that facility and just pulled everyone in that she could that could support her. And a lot of politicians were ready, you know, like, Senator Dole. He pulled along other Republican. And, you know, I’m going to put it like this: if Cheryl was a man, she would be considered a genius, okay, with the way she thinks, her business mind. And she’s a visionary. I admire that because, you know, I think out of the box as well

(laughs). So – but sometimes – and I don’t think it was just politics. I think sometimes it was just, “It’s this woman.”

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. It’s a personality problem?

White: It could be a personality problem. It could be – Interviewer: It could be a gender problem?

White: It could be – it could be a gender problem. For example, I might be considered aggressive, and you might be considered assertive, okay? But, you know, you’re labeled for specific reasons. Yeah. But the thing is, she operated on a business mind and a business level, and she got things done, okay? And that’s how I look at it. She is brilliant.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, I’ve interviewed her, and I really enjoyed it. (Laughter) Okay, so that – so, the immediate community was a little less than thrilled. What about the larger community of Topeka? Did they even know you were there?

White: The larger community – no, they didn’t. It was - our responsibility was to get out and let people know that we were there, to inform and educate people. But, at the same time, I was educating myself because I, too, didn’t know that there were, you know, eleven cases. I didn’t know certain things, so, at the same time I’m learning, I’m also teaching others. So, there were pushback in some parts, but then, there were some parts whereas it was, like, “Wow! I didn’t know that! That’s amazing!” Or we would get phone calls, whereas “Could you come to this school?” Or “Could you –,” We went out as far as Manhattan, Hays, and Missouri, Kansas. Lawrence, Kansas, was nearby, and we went into rural areas. We worked with the Rotary, social justice and youth organizations that were involved in supporting us, and because they were proud of it. Some of them, they were really genuinely proud of it. They just didn’t know.

Interviewer: Now, here, in Central High School, Little Rock was a little – at first, reluctant to commemorate its role in the civil rights saga. Was Topeka of the same mind, do you think? Did they – were they reluctant to have people know how things had been before Brown v. Board? Or were they proud of being the place where –?

White: I think, in some areas, yes, but then, in some areas, they were proud. You had lawyers that were involved – local lawyers – that were involved. You had local residents that were involved and proud of their ancestry and the story. There were groups of people that were very proud of being a part of this story. And then Sumner school was connected to the story. It’s more of how you tell that story – how we’re delivering that story – that afforded, or opened up, those doors of opportunity.

Interviewer: Okay. When you first started working with the park, did you have any specific expectations for what you would be doing, or did you just go in there and deal with whatever there was?

White: No, I knew that we needed to do the GMP. I knew there were specific things – Interviewer: Okay, so the GMP wasn’t done at the time? Okay.

White: No. I knew we needed to do that and the Historic Report, we had to develop partnerships, and be innovative in telling the story. I got involved in collections and working with UK, and then started working with the Regional Office with collections and writing up MOUs. I knew I was expected to be involved in planning meetings, attending community meetings. So, I knew what I was coming to do – to lay a foundation, okay? I knew that was expected of me.

Interviewer: Okay. You were the bricklayer?

White: Yeah. (Laughter) When you say, “Come and stand up a park,” – that’s what we say, “Stand up a park.”

Interviewer: That’s how – that’s the term, “stand up a park?” White: Yeah, “stand up a park,” yes.

Interviewer: So, Ray Harper said, “You want to come up here and stand up a park?” White: Stand up a park. Yes. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Okay. Well, that’s an exciting thing to do, I think, you know. But the problem is, it takes a long time.

White: It does.

Interviewer: And the public doesn’t realize why it’s taking so long. White: It does.

Interviewer: And so, in – hmmmm – the General Management Plan happened in 1997. What was your role?

White: Was I gone in ’96? I was leaving in ’97, but I was involved. Interviewer: Well, it was – I guess it was approved in ’97.

White: Yes, I was involved in the very beginning of my arrival; although the development of the GMP was begun long before my arrival. As stated before, we held meetings in the Southeast and Midwest Regional Offices. Employees participated from Jimmy Carter NHS and other civil rights organizations. In working with the strategic planning, we created park teams, pulled in some of our partners, and then brought groups of people together to be involved, because you had people coming in from Colorado that were spearheading it. And they were laying out logistics, when we were meeting, pulling all the people together that would be involved in it, working with Rachael Franklin Weekley. I think I enjoyed working with her the most of all.

Interviewer: Okay. And were you involved in any – I assume that the General Management Plan went out for public review. Did you have public meetings about it?

White: Mmm-hmm. Yeah. But there were – that’s why I say I was involved in putting together public meetings, as well.

Interviewer: Okay. Were they well-attended, or did people, pretty much, say, “Well, the Park Service is going to do what the Park Service is going to do?”

White: No, it was a mixture, you know, because it wasn’t – it was several meetings at different times. Sometimes you would have good feedback, and sometimes you would have people that would shrug their shoulders, and it’s according to what part of the community – you had to look at what part of the community, you had to look at the time of the year, what’s going on. We had to get smart and take all of that into consideration. What are you competing against in the community?

Interviewer: What were you competing against in the community?

White: Oh! You’re looking at events. You know, you have to, like, “Am I going to go to this or am I going to go to this?”

Interviewer: Oh, I see. I see. Oh, when you’re setting up the meetings, you had to say –?

White: Right! Get smart. In helping to stand up three parks, I learned it is best to know the community’s calendar – not just the city officials, but in each community. Sometimes, we’re arrogant, and we think people like us, when people really don’t know us, or know who we are, or know what we do, or understand who we are. And, sometimes, we assume that “If we do this, they will be there. If we build it, they will come!” But that’s not the case. And so, I had to get smart and get out there, and really start hitting the ground, and telling people about it, and going to meetings, and going to Rotary Clubs, and attending luncheons, and talking – and talking it up.

Interviewer: Were you – were you pleased with the results of the General Management Plan?

White: I had – I had no complaints. As best – people worked together. I witnessed the hard work that was put into it, the time and genuine effort.

Interviewer: Did you think there was anything that should have been in there that wasn’t or anything that wasn’t in there that should have been?

White: I can’t even remember now.

Interviewer: Can’t even remember that? (Laughter) Now, you are just fine with it? (Laughs) Twenty- two years later. (Laughter) Okay. And you were also on the Strategic Planning Team.

Was that part of the General Management Plan planning?

White: It was. It was part of that. You had all these groups coming together that played a part in it.

Interviewer: Okay, so – yeah, I want to ask you about those groups and what part they played, because I saw the list of attendees. So, what was the Roundtable Association, and why was it involved in forming the Strategic Plan? Do you recall?

White: I don’t recall the Round – Interview: The Roundtable Association.

White: – table Association. The only Roundtable Association I remember was with [unintelligible].

Interviewer: Please don’t cover your mouth up.

White: Oh! The only Roundtable Association I remember was with the National Park Service at that level. I don’t remember –

Interviewer: Oh! So, that wasn’t a community organization?

White: I don’t remember that being a community organization. But it might have been that I missed on that one. Okay. So, it could easily have been, and I don’t remember. I don’t recall now.

Interviewer: Okay. So, what – why was Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority involved in formulating the Strategic Plan? They were listed on the attendees – list of attendees.

White: Cheryl was big on education, and, of course, you know, she was a teacher. And so, she would bring –

Interviewer: Did she belong to this sorority?

White: She might have. She might easily have, because a lot of these groups were invested in Cheryl, and Cheryl was invested in them, and I know, definitely, that they were connected.

Interviewer: Okay. So, a lot of these groups, maybe, she had brought them onto the Strategic Planning Team? Okay. What about the Turnabout –Turnaround Team?

White: I don’t remember the Turnaround Team. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Okay. George Washington Carver National Historic Site was involved in the Strategic Plan. I can understand – kind of understand that. Who came from there, do you recall?

White: I don’t.

Interviewer: Okay. And was there any specific purpose for selecting that particular park? You don’t know?

White: I don’t know. I’m sorry. I don’t remember

Interviewer: Oh, that’s okay! I just – I just found this list, and I found that I couldn’t understand why certain groups were there or what they were. And so, they’re listed on the Strategic Plan as being involved with it, and I was – I’ve been trying to find someone who could remember why they were there. So, what about Saint Mark’s AME Church?

White: Oh, because they were very influential in the community, and, I believe, the Brown family belonged to that church.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, that wasn’t the church that had purchased the building from California? White: No. St. Mark’s was very influential in the community.

Interviewer: Okay. What’s a Strategic Plan?

White: Developing goals for the next five years. What do you want to accomplish, say. Interviewer: Okay. And how you are going to accomplish it?

White: And how you are going to accomplish it, exactly. You lay out your vision. Interviewer: Okay. And do you –?

White: Do people stick to it? (Laughter)

Interviewer: Well, okay. I was going to say it in a different way, but fine. Do you follow the Strategic Plan?

White: Sometimes. Not all the time, let’s be honest. Not all the time, but – sometimes, they’re outdated. Sometimes things change rapidly.

Interviewer: Right. They change – when they change within that five-year period, do you get a new Strategic Plan every five years?

White: We are supposed to do some planning. Now, we have what is called a Foundation Documentation. I believe we are going to be going back to planning, but we haven’t done that lately.

Interviewer: So, the Foundation Documentation is basically the Strategic Plan, only with a different name? (Laughs) Okay.

White: Yeah. Thank you. So, things change. That may take you in another direction, but you still operate with a vision. You know, you don’t operate by the seat of your pants.

Interviewer: So, you go back – if something changes, you go back to the Strategic Plan and say, “How does this change fit into our plan?”

White: I have done that. I have done that.

Interviewer: Okay. Or “How can we – how do we have to adjust the plan to accommodate – to accommodate this change?”

White: Yeah. Because I’m reviewing – I always go back and review and see what did we miss, or can we still do this? And so, I don’t – ever throw the baby – the baby out with the bathwater.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Yeah. Alright. Okay, so, were there any other planning events that you were involved in while you were there?

White: Besides the symposiums, I started getting involved with the SOPs, developing the SOPs for the park. But then, also, we needed personnel, and so, eventually the budget and hiring personnel.

Interviewer: Right. What personnel were there when you went – when you got there? Just you and Ray and –?

White: It was me and Ray, the AO and then – Interviewer: Treva?

White: No, I hired Treva. Interviewer: You hired Treva? Oh, okay.

White: I hired Treva after we began to assess the building; we needed to complete the condition assessment and had no maintenance staff. Hiring Treva was the best thing I did for the site; she is my legacy. I realized “Oh, my God! We need –” So, after Treva, I was able to hire an Education Specialist. But it took a minute to get positioned and secure the funding for personnel. It’s – you’d think that they would see we need this, but it doesn’t work like that. It takes a while for things to fall in place.

Interviewer: You have to tell them you need it, and, two years later, you might get it, right? So, you, the –

White: So, basically, it was me, Ray, and the Administrative Officer at that time was Teri. Interviewer: Gage?

White: Teri Gage.

Interviewer: Or Teri Page? Perry? Teri Perry.

White: Yeah. At that time, it was her. And then, later on (pause) – what was her name? See! (Laughter) Oh, my God. And I can look at her. And I’m seeing her face, and I can’t pull her name out.

Interviewer: Was Katherine right after Teri, or was there someone in between?

White: No, it was someone else. Someone else. Dang! Her name was Alicia Bullocks

Interviewer: I think it’s interesting that the Chief of Interpretation hired the maintenance person.

White: Well, we didn’t have maintenance! We didn’t have a maintenance facility. I supervised her.

Interviewer: And how did you happen to – how did you happen to do that? Did you send out –?

White: We sent out [unintelligible – crosstalk] applications, of course. We put it out locally, and she was local, and, actually, she was working and going to Tech College for maintenance. She had, actually, a lot of skills, and I was impressed with her, and it was just a perfect time to afford her this opportunity, and she has been there ever since. If you met Treva, she is no nonsense and not pretentious, but she also has a sense of humor.

Interviewer: Everybody seems to be impressed with your choice (laughs). White: (Laughs) Really?

Interviewer: (Laughs) Yeah! Everybody I’ve talked to seems to have been impressed with your choice of that – of Treva.

White: Well, Treva was – she was great!

Interviewer: Yeah, and she’s very, very dedicated to the building. White: Yeah, she is. Yeah, she is.

Interviewer: So, when you started, was (chuckles) – I almost hate to ask this question – was there any interpretive – interpretation going on when you got there, or did you invent it all?

White: I think Cheryl was doing some things at the Foundation, but there wasn’t, far as at the park, because there was no one –

Interviewer: To do it?

White: Right. We didn’t have the personnel to do it. So, you had the Superintendent and you had the Administrative Officer.

Interviewer: Okay. So, when you came, they were the first two. They weren’t doing any interpretation – any interpretation? They pulled you up there to establish the interpretive program?

White: Yeah. When Ray called, my job was to get the park going.

Interviewer: Okay. And the first – and I – just to recap, the things that you did for the interpretive program were to design some temporary exhibits –?

White: Exhibits. Curriculum. Symposiums. Develop partnerships, planning, park operations, and I worked with the planners for the permanent exhibits before I left.

Interviewer: Curriculum that could be sent out? White: Yep.

Interviewer: Okay. You worked on the symposiums?

White: Brown v. Board was hosting a symposium when I arrived, and I dived right in. We later collaborated on the Plessy v Ferguson symposium at Howard University. We collaborated on the symposium at Southern University in Baton, Rogue, Louisiana. We held small events and partnering with some of the families from the cases and bringing them into the community.

Interviewer: Okay, so, did you see the – did you see the park, like, mission as interpreting Brown v.

Board or the larger civil rights event, I guess you could say – saga?

White: And, honest – me? Interviewer: Mmm-hmm.

White: I saw it as the larger.

Interviewer: Okay, so you were focused on the larger world?

White: It’s Brown v. Board, but also the larger world that included all the cases. The story of the lawyers-- such as Charles Hamilton Houston, Marshall, Jack Greenberg, Oliver Hill etcetera. We – when I left, we were just in the process of planning what is there now at Brown v. Board, okay? So, I was beginning to work with them when I left. So – but, when you look at civil rights, even here [at Central High School National Historic Site], the story of the Little Rock Nine was about human rights and the story of a people. And Brown v. Board was also the struggle of a people across the country. And you have to tell all their stories because, basically, the movement was built on the backbone of our youth, but they don’t know that. How do you instill that into their consciousness is what I keep saying, you know? And, constantly, I’m asking what are the consequences of humanity as we share those stories? And when you share one story, it’s going to lead to another, and so, that becomes that domino effect, whereas then, you’re telling the story of civil rights. And it’s reaching beyond that one moment.

Interviewer: Okay. And so, as you were attempting to broaden the story, did you find people who didn’t want you to do that, who wanted to just focus on the Brown v. Board decision?

White: I didn’t have anyone to tell me, “No.” I didn’t have anyone slap my hand. Interviewer: Oh, okay. Nobody in the community said, “Don’t do this?” (Laughs) Okay. Good!

White: (Laughs) No, I didn’t – I didn’t have that pushed upon me. But I think I had other, fellow colleagues that said, “Robby is doing this. Robin’s trying to do this. Robin is always –” So, I had more of colleagues saying things than I did the community.

Interviewer: Okay. The community didn’t? White: No.

Interviewer: Okay. So, were you involved with creating interpretive packages for visitors and school children?

White: By then, I had hired an Education – and then –

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, you just supervised that person? Alright, well, that’s an involvement. White: Yes. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Okay, and these things – these materials went out nationwide, they weren’t just confined to the immediate region?

White: Right. They weren’t confined, no.

Interviewer: In your opinion, GPRA – what’s that stand for? I used to know that. G-P-R-A – instituted –

White: I know it’s something about –

Interviewer: – in 1993, the subsequent NPS restructuring plan and the institution of performance management programs and reporting. Did any of that change the interpretive program for Brown v. Board? Change your focus or change how you did the interpretive – management of the interpretive program? No?

White: No. Not really, no.

Interviewer: It was just changing – a change in how you reported what you were doing? White: Exactly. That’s all. It didn’t change what we were doing, it’s just reporting.

Interviewer: Okay. And did it change, at all, how you planned to – for what you were doing? No? (Laughs) Okay, when you left – when you left Brown v. Board, what did you think could be improved?

White: I think that, when I left, I felt that stronger relationships in the community could be improved, definitely. But I also felt – you know, felt that the Park Service could play a better role in being more visible in creating stronger relationships, and truly investing in rural areas.

Interviewer: How could they do that?

White: Well, the park needed more funding for staff and programming. Visibility includes personnel. If I’m involved in management and research, if an Education Specialist is one person out in the field – and, before that person arrived, I was out in the field – some duties will be neglected and impact my job. So, with that one person out in the field, and you have this large demographic area to cover, something is going to be neglected.

Interviewer: When you were at – when you were on the job – or, when you were out in the community, let’s say, did you wear your uniform every time so that they’d know you were there?

White: Sure did.

Interviewer: Okay. Did everybody else wear their uniforms?

White: Yeah. We were uniformed-up! And, you know – you know – Interviewer: Hat and everything, huh?

White: Yeah, because you were proud, you know, and you wanted people to know. We had a partnership, like, with Washburn University and with their history department, so we held events there. And so, I had to work with these partnerships at this level in making things happen in the community. Because, I remember, one of the events we had at Washburn University, Ernest Green was there, Treopia, his sister, was there, and we ended up together. And so, I met Treopia long before I came here. We had developed a partnership. And so, in that, I was developing and networking with people across the country that I later came into contact with and was working with, you know.

Interviewer: Right. So, did you have – besides the Brown Foundation and Washburn University and, I guess, UK, did you have any other partnerships?

White: KSU, University of Kansas, UK, NAACP in Topeka, District of Columbia, Howard University, Friends of Morton School, in Farmington, VA, etcetera.

Interviewer: NAACP?

White: Yes, definitely, we worked with the NAACP! (Laughter) Definitely. Yes, yes. Interviewer: Okay, now, were – which one of these things were, like, formal relationships? White: All of them. All of them.

Interviewer: All of them? You had MOUs or whatever?

White: We had MOUs, and then we collaborated on programs, so – and sometimes they would sponsor or bring people in when we couldn’t, or they would pay for travel. And so, in those partnerships, whereas they would pick up where we couldn’t, you know, and take care of things that we couldn’t take care of. We were putting the park’s Standard of Operating Procedures in place.

Interviewer: Okay. And, I assume that, because you had such a small staff –

White: We had such small money. (Laughs), but we had people that loved working with and supporting us where needed.

Interviewer: – you had a limited pool from which to draw to get things done, so you needed all those partners – partnerships?

White: Yeah, we definitely – but, even here, you need a lot of partners. Because it brings diversity. It brings different perspectives. And it affords you the opportunity to build a bond, you know, to build capacity, to build upon each other.

Interviewer: Were you at the Grand Opening? Did you go to the Grand Opening? White: Yes.

Interviewer: I had a question about why you had a Grand Opening before you had a building to open. White: I don’t know.

Interviewer: (Laughs) The Park Service just decided you should do that? White: I don’t know. They just –

Interviewer: So, did you help plan for the Grand Opening? White: No. The Dedication.

Interviewer: No? You just attended?

White: I just attended. I was there as part of the Incident Command Team. I was there as part of that and helping with, like, doing programs and things like that.

Interviewer: Okay, because, in 2004 was when the Dedication and the building –

White: Well, that’s when I went to the Dedication. Interviewer: Oh, you went for the Dedication?

White: I went for the Dedication, because – and our president, at that time – Interviewer: Bush.

White: Yes. He was talking about Ruby Bridges. And I’m like – I had to tell Secret Service people, “He’s talking about Ruby Bridges.” And so, me and Cheryl and a few people, we had to write up some stuff and get it to him to – for him to revise his speech.

Interviewer: So, did you – oh! So, you had – you got to review his speech before he gave it to make sure that it was –?

White: No, we didn’t get to, but we had to scrap something together for him for the second round, when he made that mistake. I’m talking to people, and I’m, like, “This is – this is not [unintelligible] –

Interviewer: “This is not that one!”

White: “No! This is not New Orleans!” He was talking about Ruby Bridges. And then, at that time, I think – oh, what’s her name? Fran? I think Fran was the Director, and then I had to give her information as well because she –

Interviewer: Was confused?

White: She was going through there and didn’t know who was what. And so, they were asking – the people that were with her was asking me questions, and I had to answer their questions, and they - and I’m, like, “This is ridiculous!” (Laughter) “It’s ridiculous!” But, yeah –

Interviewer: Okay, so you went to the Dedication – to the Dedication with President Bush? White: I went to the Dedication, yeah.

Interviewer: But the Grand Opening, apparently, was held, like, in the late 1990s. White: I didn’t go to that. I didn’t attend that.

Interviewer: You didn’t go to that? White: I didn’t attend that.

Interviewer: Okay, well, regarding the work that you’ve done for Brown v. Board, what are you most proud of doing?

White: Honestly?

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm. Yes, honestly. White: Treva.

Interviewer: Treva? (Laughs)

White: Yep.

Interviewer: Getting Treva there?

White: Getting Treva there, because she’s a mainstay and – longevity. You’re looking at sustainability. But, you know, besides that, going into the communities and talking with children. And, actually, we had a storytelling program, and so I used to do a lot of storytelling.

Interviewer: Oh! Did they come to the park, or did you go there?

White: I would – I would go to them, and, actually, we founded it out of Washburn University. So, the kids would come there, to Washburn, introduce them around and talking about education and college and going to the next level, and just do storytelling with them.

Interviewer: Oh! What age group were they?

White: Elementary and middle school. Yep. So, yeah, those are the things that I recall and take pride in. We – it was a while back. Let me see. Was it Barnes and Noble that wanted us to do storytelling there? But we – I selected that we do it at the university. And so –

Interviewer: That’s a more – a more neutral location?

White: Yeah, and I thought it was a good choice, you know?

Interviewer: Okay. Of – is there something that I – you were hoping I would ask you about Brown v. Board that you would like to talk about that I haven’t mentioned? We’ve talked about partnerships and developing the first part of the interpretive program, personnel, budget –

White: And that’s it! Coming on board and enter and exit.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. And the budget was okay? Were you - did you feel like the budget was adequate, just to finish off that –?

White: In the beginning, but, you know, we needed to build, and, eventually, we were able to hire, so the budget was increased. I think that, most importantly, was the partnerships that were across the country that – the networking that was going on and the people that were involved, the educational institutions that were involved. We were working with the State of Alabama – we hosted an event at – we hosted an event at – Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where is that? Is that Birmingham or Montgomery?

Interviewer: Or Selma?

White: The four little girls were bombed in Birmingham; they called it Bombingham. Selma to Montgomery was about Bloody Sunday. So, we were working with both at that time. They were saying that the city of Montgomery was progressing, and the mayor was a progressive, so we were networking there. We were networking there. We were networking in Selma, and we were networking in Atlanta because we were also working with Carter. So, I think it was amazing what we were doing and how we was trying to take off, and the networking that was going on, and spreading the word, and hosting

some of the meetings, because we didn’t have the conference space – the Strategic Planning and all those meetings weren’t always held in – at Brown. We were in Atlanta. We were in Alabama. We were in Louisiana.

Interviewer: So, you were, like, the traveling road show?

White: We were! We were! And we were telling the story and sharing the story with people and building that capacity across the country. That, to me, was amazing, you know, and it – we don’t do that anymore, but –

Interviewer: Okay. You mean “we” by the Park Service or “we” by the parks that were involved at the time?

White: I – if I had a chance to do it, I would do it. Even here, I would do it. But you have to have the capacity.

Interviewer: Right. You have to be able to travel?

White: Yeah, and the money, and all that. And I – a lot of that, even though we were able to pay our own way, had groups that paid their way, came in, and participated because people wanted to be involved, and people wanted to be connected to the story. That’s what I witnessed. It was strong support across the country, and, to me, that was awesome.

Interviewer: That was awesome. I think that sounds like an awesome place to stop this interview. So, I’m going to turn off the recording device.

END OF INTERVIEW