

Interview of the Honorable Reuben Anderson by Kate Medley, camera by April Grayson

Kate Medley: To start off, this is Kate Medley interviewing Judge Reuben Anderson in Jackson, Mississippi, on November 6, 2006. First off, I was wondering if you would just tell us a little bit about your educational background that led up to you coming to law school at the University of Mississippi.

Judge Reuben Anderson: Well, I went to the public schools in the city of Jackson, graduated from Jim Hill High School in 1960, went to Tougaloo College, graduate from Tougaloo in 1964. I attempted to go to Ole Miss law school in 1964, wasn't admitted. I went to law school at a law school in Louisiana called Southern University. I spent a year there, then was accepted to Ole Miss law school in the fall of '65 and spent two years there, and I graduated in June of 1967.

KM: And, can you talk a little bit about why you wanted to become a lawyer?

RA: I was fortunate enough to grow up kind of in the household of a lawyer here in Jackson, Mississippi, a lawyer by the name of Jack Young. He was a civil rights lawyer, and his son and I were the same age, and his name was Jack Young, Jr. We were classmates in high school and big friends, and I spent a lot of time at his house. Like I mentioned, his father was a civil rights lawyer, and one of the premier civil rights lawyers in Mississippi during the '50s and '60s, and I was around his house all the time. I observed him, I had a lot of respect for him, and I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to be a civil rights lawyer. And that was my main goal and ambition in life, to, was to be a lawyer. And he helped me in a lot of ways, tried to get me into law school at Ole Miss. At that time, you had to have your application signed by five graduates of the law school, and I didn't know five lawyers—I don't think he did either, so they rejected my application. He got me in law school at Southern University in Baton Rouge, and I spent a year there, like I said. And the dean of the law school, Josh Morse, contacted me. I guess my application was still on file, and I was admitted in the fall of 1965. So I've wanted to be a lawyer, and a civil rights lawyer, my whole career. (03:03)

KM: Do you recall the first time you were ever in Oxford or on the campus of Ole Miss?

RA: Yeah, when I went up there to law school in 1965, September. My brother drove me up and dropped me off—and a very gorgeous place—but 1965 was kind of a different time and place in Mississippi. It was not a place that I enjoyed, but it was a place I decided to go, and I wanted to be a lawyer, and my options were pretty limited at that time.

KM: And, and just for the record, can you kind of put, put that in historical context of what—I mean, you're coming in on a few years after James Meredith had come into the university, but it's—

RA: I don't remember the exact number of African American students when I got there. I think there were five. It was not a pleasant place for African Americans at that time. Mississippi was not a pleasant place. Most everything in the state was segregated at that time—all of the schools, public accommodations, and everything else. And it was a, an unpleasant time. I guess that's a good description of it. (04:32)

KM: And you said that there were several other black students at the school. And was that in the law school?

RA: No, they were in the undergraduate school. They had a much more difficult time than I did. I was in the law school, and there was one other person in the law school who was a year behind me. And, uh, but the, the students in the undergrad school had a much more difficult time than I did. They were harassed on a regular basis, and we kind of kept together, the five or six of us. Ate together in the cafeteria. There were, I wouldn't say, incidents all the time, but there was quite a bit of harassment by students, of the, all of the African American students. (05:38)

KM: And then the law school in particular—I've read in some of the old newspaper archives from the university of, about the incident with Cleve McDowell.

RA: Yeah, that happened, I don't remember when, but before I got there. Was it the year before?

KM: I think he, that was in '63. He was, as I recall he was only there for a couple of months.

RA: Yeah. I knew him and—I didn't know him at the time, but I knew him after the incident, and he went on to become a lawyer, and he's deceased now.

KM: Was that, do you see—was that difficult coming in on the heels of that incident?

RA: The big challenge I had was trying to keep up with my studies, more than anything else. Law school was different and challenging, and I didn't pay much attention to all of the things that were going on around me. I spent most of my time trying to catch up on my lessons, but like I said, it was a difficult time, and the, the youngsters that were in undergraduate school had a *real* difficult time. They threw things at them and harassed them. I kind of, being at the law school, was kind of away from that, and I spent most of my time in the library, and when I wasn't in the library, I was studying in the dorm, so, but my two years were not exciting and pleasant. There were some pleasant aspects of it. I got to know and meet a lot of good and capable friends there, particularly some on the faculty. But generally speaking, you were avoided by everybody else. (07:43)

KM: Now there were one or two other black students admitted to the law school the same year you were. I presume that they were a year behind you?

RA: They would have been. Well, there were two there when I was there—Doug Baker, and then a gentleman came named William Miller, after I did. And if I'm not mistaken, they were the only ones.

KM: Do you recall any, any particular anecdotes of, of tension between you and other students or other faculty?

RA: Now the law school was somewhat different in the context that the students were somewhat older, and they were probably like me, trying to keep up with all the work that you had to do. Josh Morse, who was the dean at the time, paid a lot of attention to the minority students, and he—there were several professors who befriended me. Fellow named Holden from Australia, and a fellow named Michael Horowitz, who was there, and I became friendly with them more so than other students, so—but it was a lot of isolation, and that was to be expected. I mean, that was typically what Mississippi was like during that time. (09:32)

KM: And how did—what was Mr. Morse's presence amongst the students? How did he care to make—

RA: He was a very engaging gentleman who, in my opinion, was interested in Ole Miss, the law school in particular, being an integrated institution. He had gone and recruited professors from outside Mississippi. I think he had done some work at Yale and had connections at Yale and brought several Yale professors down. That didn't go well with the Legislature, nor did it go well with a number of people on, on the faculty. But he understood how important it was that, that the law school be an, be an integrated institution. And I think that's why he recruited me.

KM: As I've talked to Mr. Morse, I've heard him more allude to the controversy that surrounded his presence there. Were you as a student aware of—?

RA: No, I was not aware of the challenges that he had. I'm pretty sure that the power structure in Mississippi had great concerns about recruiting law professors from outside of Mississippi. I know they were concerned that he was interested in creating and helping create a legal services program. But I was not aware of all of those political undergird—undergirding things that were happening. But I could imagine, though, that that's why they ended up having to leave. (11:40)

KM: Did you participate at all in the legal services program that—

RA: I did, I worked part-time at the legal services program. I think it was my senior year.

KM: And can you talk a little bit about what that organization, about the intent of that organization?

RA: Well, initially they were doing the regular things of, that I was involved in, helping people with food stamp issues and social service issues and—the program later developed into dealing with integration of schools and things of that nature. But early on, it was just basic service to poor people. (12:27)

KM: In what ways do you think that Mr. Morse, and his presence as dean of the law school, was most impacting?

RA: Well, I would doubt whether or not the law school would've been an integrated institution but for him. I know that I wouldn't have been there except that he encouraged me and welcomed me to the university, and I would assume the same thing was true all the while he was there. He was a local Mississippian who was well respected. The other thing I think is more significant was that he brought in a diverse faculty, brought in new thoughts and new ideas, and I think Mississippi needed it at that time. (13:32)

KM: I know you're short on time, but I want to make sure—(to April Grayson on camera) do you have any?

April Grayson: I was just wondering about graduation, sort of whether it felt like a historic kind of event.

KM: (to RA) You, you being the first black student to graduate from the law school—did, did that feel like a historical event, did you—

RA: No, in fact, I don't ever mention that. I, I think it's of no significance. People mention it, but I never have mentioned it. It's not something that I would list as an accomplishment of mine. It's not an accomplishment. I was just at the right place at the right time, in terms of being given the opportunity to go to Ole Miss. But, I can remember my graduation, but it was nothing significant about it at all. (14:33)

AG (to KM): What about some of his work since then?

KM: Yeah, could you talk a little bit about the, the work, the legal work or the civil rights work that you've done since becoming a lawyer?

RA: Well, I graduated in June of 1967. I immediately began work for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. I came here to Jackson and started work for a lady named Marian Wright Edelman. She ran the Legal Defense Fund office. As soon as I got to the office, I ended up being drafted, getting notice that I was going to be drafted to go to, to Vietnam. And that point in time, the Vietnam War was hot and heavy. Back in 1967, there were just six African American lawyers in Mississippi, and there were very f—three civil rights lawyers to handle all of the civil rights litigation going on, so lawyers who were members of the Mississippi Bar were essential. You couldn't go to court unless you were a member of the bar. And I engaged in, in every aspect, mostly school desegregation. We—when I say we, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund office was responsible for a majority of the school desegregation cases that were filed in Mississippi, the public

accommodation cases, and also voting rights, so I ended up moving to New York, and I changed my local board to New York, and I worked for the Legal Defense Fund in New York for about a year, trying to get a deferment not to go to Vietnam. And when that didn't work, I moved back to Jackson, and ended up getting a deferment from my local board to practice civil right law. They understood that it was important to have civil rights lawyers in Mississippi, and I got a deferment, and that's what I did until, along with Fred Banks and Mel Leventhal and several other lawyers in our office, I practiced civil rights law up until about 1974. Pretty much exclusively school desegregation, like I said. And our office was, carried the back, carried the burden of most of the civil rights litigation in Mississippi. And after I stopped doing it, our office still continued to do it. I had to make money, so I went off into doing litigation and civil litigation and criminal work. (17:49)

KM: Now, coming out of a, a law school like Ole Miss, were you—do you feel like that school provided you with a good background to practice civil rights litigation?

RA: It provided me with admission to the Bar, which was the essential thing. But back—the civil rights lawyers, like I mentioned to you, Mr. Young and Jess Brown, they didn't go to law school. They were admitted to the bar under a program of just having to take the bar exam after studying under another lawyer, so I was—nobody could question my credentials. I had the same degree that they had. But I was—Ole Miss is a good law school today and back then, so I was adequately prepared. (18:43)

AG (to KM): The Sovereignty Commission.

KM (to AG): I might let you ask this question.

AG (to RA): I'm just wondering if you ever, if the Sovereignty Commission sort of ever played any role in your early career and if you felt their presence, or could you comment on their role in the state?

RA: Well, during that early period, I had no idea what the Sovereignty Commission was. But after looking into the files, I saw that they had—I wouldn't say *spies*—but they had informants who were at our meetings, and they were actively involved in every aspect of the civil rights movement, monitoring our office and meetings that we attended, so they were very much involved, at least during all of the, the '60s. I think they probably kind of backed away during the, during the '70s. So.

KM: I think that pretty much wraps it up.

RA: Okey-doke. Thank you. I enjoyed reminiscing.

KM: We appreciate it. Yeah.

RA: I don't remember everything, but I remember a lot of what took place.

KM: Well, I appreciate you—

RA: Well, thank— (camera off)

END INTERVIEW. (20:14)