CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Mr. Argus Gene Parks

INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham

G= Gene Parks

M:
, 2009. And we were just getting started or just finishing up rather your tenure in Miami.

M: And how are you today?

G: doing pretty well.

M: Okay. . And can you tell us a little bit about you.

Lakewood Church of Jacksonville, correct?

G: .

M: Can you tell us about what the congregation was like, the number of people and I guess the socioeconomic environment that the church was in?

G: Okay. Well, Lakewood is a suburban church with a typical middle class congregation of no major funders. e that. The experience that I had with the congregation was very compatible. We had

M: Well, that was 1968.

G: Uh-huh.

M: And a little bit of the context before and during the time you were there, nationally, things were kind of unraveling. The 1964 Civil Rights Act had been passed. The 1965

--

there were some serious upheavals. And so in 1966, you were coming into that, and it must have been, you know, very unsettling right then, right immediately when you were in Jacksonville. What was Jacksonville like in 1966, if we can go back a little bit?

G: Sure.

M: And talk about how the civic leadership, the mayor, the city council. How were they dealing with some of those issues.

G: Yeah.

M: And how you, I guess, would have been embroiled or brought into some of that.

G: lvement. It really had its roots in my learning about a new ministry called Urban Ministry. And because of that, it developed into a significant difference on the part of the people in the congregation. But

M: And so this was a trade organization from in town --

G: Right.

M: And you were trying to create a situation whereby there would be dialogue and they

G: No dialogue at all.

M: How did they respond, did they say well, we have no problems, we need no

--

what was the rationale of their complaint?

G: They simply refused to attend the meeting. We had a large group of people that were waiting for them to come to have a conversation, and they would not do that. And one of the principle leaders in that was a realtor who was a member of the Southside Church which was just down the street from Lakewood.

G: The bishop was in the area and this realtor told the bishop that he wanted me out of Jacksonville, never to be allowed to come to Jacksonville in any responsibility. And the bishop gave him a response that he did not enjoy because the bishop knew, understood what was happening. And he simply dismissed the gentleman.

M: Now, who was the bishop at that time?

G:

M: Well, we can come back to that.

G:

M: So who were the people that you were -- who were your colleagues who were trying

G: No.

M: Who were some of the other leaders and what areas and constituencies did they represent?

G: We had clergy from Presbyterian, Lutheran, myself, one Catholic. So we had --

M: So it was primarily composed of religious people that were doing this work?

G: Yes.

M: Were there any African-American leaders as well involved?

G: Yes.

M: They were also church members or church leaders?

G: We did not have a pastor that was a part of that corps. But we had support from pastors --

M: assassintation?

G: It was after the Martin Luther King.

G: Yeah.

M: Wow! Did you do it or did it ever happen like that?

G: No, no.

our mission but we had an attorney who was a member of the congregation, Hudson Oliff -- He said, I want to take you to lunch. We went to lunch. And he said, I want to tell you something. He said, I want you to know that as far as black people are concerned, I am going to keep them the way they are, where they are, as long as I can, period. Time marches on.

M: This is while you were still pastor of the church?

G: . Time marches on. I get a couple of hate letters, anonymous hate letters.
any more hate mail, but I got a letter of apology. And when I got that letter and read it, I was standing beside the sofa in the living room when I opened it, and I just dropped to my knees and thanked God. Assuming the sincerity of the letter, this was not an anonymous letter, it was, you know, Hudson, and his apology about this conversation we had had. ing for judge. Hello? But I

G: Sam Jacobson was an attorney in town. He and I had developed a friendship from

guy. He and I had a conversation about people who were arrested and put on probation. And he said, You know, I see people in court all the time. And he said, I see them, those who need to be locked up. I see those who can make it on the street on probation. And But we need to have some way of relating to that population. And so he and I then began to idence program. In order for that to function, we had to have the judges in sync with us and willing to support it.

M: Now, would this be a system whereby they would live in a dormitory kind of setting?

G: Uh-huh.

M: And be minimally supervised and they would have to check in and move and live in that area?

G: The ground rules were that they had to get a job. They had to save money. They had to report to their officer and it worked like a charm. In time, there were -- at one point, there were 12 of those sites not just in Jacksonville, but it had spread to some other areas.

M: Now, is this when you were in Urban Ministries that you carried this out?

G: Right. Exactly.

M: Now, was it a faith-based system whereby the Methodist Church sponsored it?

our first big breakthrough.

M: And where was that?

G:

M: Now, Cesar Chavez came to Florida,

G: No.

M: But it was

G: Yes. I took Cesar to Jacksonville, and we had -- it was almost an impromptu kind of thing, but we had a small meeting at the church where my office was for folks who were interested in him and what they were doing, so ... And we also had him on television in Jacksonville. So my t
continue to contribute to their movement,
an honor and a privilege to know Cesar for what little time I had with him.

M: Okay. One of the other initiatives that you were involved in pretty early on is Planned Parenthood.

G: Uh-huh.

M: Can you reflect a little bit about that and how you got involved and interested in it?

G: Sure. Sure. They had a chapter in Jacksonville and the director was a Methodist preacher, Chuck Cairn (phonetic). And because of that connection, I joined the committee and stayed involved with them for a long, long time in Jacksonville.

G: And I think I also mentioned that I came to Lakeland to meet with the chapter here. I But I came down to give them some insights on what I was seeing. And it was a good experience. And then I was elected to the General Board of Planned Parenthood nationally. And that was also instructive for

M: So you were with Planned Parenthood in one capacity or another for how many years?

G: I would say probably five, six, something like that.

M: And one of the people that you interacted with was Lois Cowles Harrison. Can you reflect a little bit about how you met her and what kind of interaction you had with her over the years?

G: I just met her through Planned Parenthood. And they were having some difficulties in their organization and I came down and had sort of a little seminar session we them. So it was not an extended, you know, involvement, it was just they invited me, asked me to come, you know, have some chat. And it was worthwhile. I always have remembered her and appreciated her from that small amount of time that I was with her.

M: Now, was there a woman by the name of Faye Walton that you met in relation to --

G: She was the National Board --

M: -- the National Board of Planned Parenthood?

G: Yes. Yes, I knew her well.

M: Okay. One of the things in your time in the Urban Ministry had to do with law enforcement; is that correct? They solicited your support or your help in helping them about some things; is that correct? Can you kind of go through that a little bit?

G: Yes. Actually, a specific -- in the black community in Jacksonville, there was a real sort of a semi-explosion of actions by young men and things got out of hand. And so the and took them in across town into a holding facility. And this, as you can imagine, was quite a furor. The sheriff called me late one evening and told me that he was planning to return a busload of these young people back to their community. And he wanted me to be the escort for the bus. And so I -- it was to be as quiet as possible. But I accepted the task, and it was quite an interesting experience. the ground, but the chopper was overhead. And when we got to our destination and we were ready to begin to get the youngsters back out, the choppers were overhead with their lights, and they provided the light for our whole, you know, the activity that was going on. So it was a one-time event and it was helpful for my relationships within the community of both sides of the street. The one thing that I guess I was successful at was that I was accepted by both sides of the town. The list I gave you of the agencies that -- I was just totally involved in just about any and

my ministry and that was played out in all kinds of settings.

M: So just so we understand, these young boys were on a bus and they were being taken and released at a certain spot --

G: Back in their neighborhoods.

M: And they were to be taken back to their neighborhoods, okay. All right. I see. Okay. So did they trust you too, those kids?

G: I got along with -- But we had a genuine love for one another in this movement. We truly did. And it was a godsend to me. It truly was. I could never ever imagine an aspect of ministry that would have meant to me personally what this meant.

M: So you were in this position until 1998 when you retired?

G: Uh-huh.

M: And you moved to Lakeland?

G: Moved to Lakeland so we could be with Laura Edwards.

M: Yes. Did you miss it? Did you get up every day and think, wow, I really miss what I was doing? How can I get back into it and what can I do here to satisfy my eagerness?

G: I can tell you what happened. The director of Tampa United Methodist Centers knew me. And I had not been here very long. Her name is Mary Hester. But she came to me with an advisor to her and she a70.02 697.18 T97.185(ss)11( )-4(i)5(t)6(?)-7(D)5(i)5(d)]TJET0e425.78

G: Really.