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Interview with
L. CLIFFORD DAVIS
April 11, 2014

Place of Interview: Fort Worth, TX

Interviewer: Callie Millier

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Oral History Collection

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Mrs. Millier: This is Callie Millier interviewing Mr. Clifford Davis for UNT's Desegregating DFW [Oral History] Project. It's April 11, 2014, and we're in Fort Worth at Mr. Davis's office in the conference room.

Could we begin with telling us when and where you were born?

Mr. Davis: Well, let me first welcome you to our workplace.

I was born in the great community of Wilton, Arkansas, which is twenty-five miles across the line at Texarkana in Arkansas, the adjoining county. [It was a] very rural community, so rural that almost every family knew every other family--almost--in the community. I was born in 1924 and we had

satisfactory, friendly relationship [with whites], although it was a fully segregated community. They were not all that cruel, as such. But I should mention there was a little town north of us: it was an all-white town, no black people lived up there at all in Alleene, Arkansas. But down in Wilton, everybody knew everybody and we spoke to everybody and we didn't have racial turmoil, although we were totally segregated.

Millier: And what was it like, daily life for a child?

Davis: Well, of course, it's a rural community, so that we were farming people. Everybody was [in a] farming community, farming, and there was a lumber mill. So everybody there was either farming or a few people worked in the timber industry in the saw mill. As I've already stated, almost everybody knew almost everybody else and every other family in the community, so that to an extent there was fairly cordial relationship. They [the whites] had their schools and we had ours. They had their churches and we had ours; there was no intermingling as such. Except we did have the 19th of June celebration [Juneteenth, commemorating the abolition of slavery] and we'd always have a baseball game, and some of

the [white] people would come to watch the baseball game with us. Other than that, it was all [separate]: they did their thing and we did ours.

Millier: And what did you farm, what was the main crop?

Davis: The main crop in that area was cotton. That was the commercial crop; of course, everybody grew the feed stuff, the corn and peas. We had three vegetable gardens on our farm. My daddy owned a small farm, and we had three vegetable gardens on it, and we grew cotton and corn and potatoes of all kinds and vegetable gardens and all of those things, peas-- things that were grown in that area of Arkansas. That's how we made our living.

Millier: And who were your parents?

Davis: My father's name was Augustus Davis. My mother's name was Dora Davis. She was from the Ashdown [Arkansas] community, which was the county seat community. They lived in a rural area of Ashdown called the Hainey [?] Creek area. That was her area of origin. My daddy grew up, basically, in Arkansas, although he was born in Tennessee. He came to Arkansas--his mother brought him to Arkansas early, when our family moved to Arkansas.

Millier: What were they like?

Davis: I had what I like to think of as wonderful parents. They tried to instill in us value systems, respect for one another, support for one another, to be caring and good citizens, and they emphasized the importance of education. My mother, unfortunately, lost her eyesight when she was in the third grade. Of course, in those days, in the early 1900s, you can imagine the medical treatment in a rural community. She recovered some eyesight when she was eighteen. Of course, she was not going back to school at age eighteen, in the third grade. She was a grown person in those days. My daddy finished the eighth grade [at] the school at Wilton.

Now, I should mention Arkansas was in the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. They had a different standard from the Southern Association [of Colleges and Secondary Schools]. So we always had twelfth grade, but we had the high school at Ashdown for whites, and for blacks we had a high school for blacks, because we were a county training school. They provided transportation for whites by bus, but they did not provide transportation for us. So that my parents ultimately made arrangements for us to go to Little Rock,

[Arkansas], where we could attend high school. And of the seven children, six of us did go to Little Rock and attend Dunbar High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Millier: What was that like, living apart from your parents?

Davis: Well, there were five or six of us in the home. One, my older sister, was in college at the time I went up. But the older ones gave guidance to us, and we had good manners and good discipline, and we had no problems, each one doing his or her share to support the existence of all of us. That's one of the things we learned: to be supportive of one another and be cooperative with one another, and disciplined. We had no problem with discipline, none of us really [chuckles] had any problems with the police or anything like that, or delinquency in school. We never had that problem. Although our parents were still down in Wilton, which is 125 to 130 miles away.

Millier: Did you have any teachers that were especially influential for you?

Davis: Yes, I was greatly influenced by Mrs. McConnico [?], who was in social science, mostly government and history. At Dunbar [High School] we had a program. Everyone had an opportunity to belong to some kind

of club, and she had the Current History Club, and I joined that club. And part of the program was that we had to read the paper every day, as well as read news magazines and keep up with current events. So I had to read, as a matter of habit, *Look*, *Life* magazine, *Reader's Digest*, and other magazines that were published in those days. I had to read them all the time because when the club met, we'd have a monthly meeting, and we'd have to discuss events. That developed my interest in keeping up with the news, and I've followed that all of my life, and as a matter of fact, to this day I subscribe to both the Dallas [*Morning News*] and the [Fort Worth] *Star-Telegram*, and read them every morning before I go to work, even now.

Millier: So while you were in high school, World War II began over in Europe, and then the U.S entered the war in 1941. What do you recall--were there people from your high school that enlisted and joined [the military]?

Davis: Well, of course the draft was going on, and by 1943-44 when the war got very, very hot, almost everyone physically fit was drafted. I had a growth on my foot, a bone growth malfunction. And I had to cut

out [pointing to his shoe] and allow space for my foot to go. In World War II you had to register [for the draft] on your eighteenth birthday. And the day I registered--they'd give you your paperwork and you had to fill it out and send it back in within two weeks, and I did. It so happens that I finished high school in January 1942 and turned eighteen. They were going to draft me on December 23, 1943, and that growth on my foot caused me to be rejected because they would have had to operate on it, or give me special shoes or something. I did not go to the military, but almost all able-bodied men were drafted at some point during World War II.

Millier: And were any of your brothers?

Davis: I had two brothers that were in the military: my oldest brother and the brother immediately above me. I had two other brothers. One we had lost, he had gotten killed in an automobile accident in 1942. The other one, who had moved to Dallas--he's the only one who did not go to [high school in] Little Rock--he came to Dallas and started working in the defense industry, and was working in the defense industry so he never did go into the military. The two other brothers did go into the military, but I did not go

because of that deferment. I finally got drafted in 1954, after the Korean War.

Millier: Did you want to get drafted into the--

Davis: No, no, I did not [chuckles] want to go there.

Millier: Okay. So after high school, you enrolled at Philander Smith College?

Davis: Philander Smith College was the local institution there in Little Rock, and I graduated from Dunbar on a Friday, and they permitted me--you couldn't go back to campus and hang around on campus at Dunbar. You had to be either in school or in class. You couldn't--there's no loitering. I had just turned [seventeen] and didn't know what else to do. So on that Tuesday I enrolled at Philander in 1942.

Millier: What was your time there like?

Davis: It was enjoyable, but you must remember the war is getting pretty hot. By 1943, as a matter of fact, when school was out in the spring semester of 1943, they drafted everything but the scrubs and old men. [Laughs] There were, at one time, probably twenty-five or thirty men, male characters, on campus because everybody else was drafted. The older fellas and one or two of us who were scraps, as I call them, were around the campus. But we tried to maintain a

good campus life.

We had a good spirit, because the philosophy there was--the president tried to convey to all of us that you don't go to college to learn to make a living. You can make a living a lot of ways, but you go to college to learn how to *live*. The environment was to try to instill into the student population concepts about *living* a fruitful, beneficial life, productive for yourself and the community. So we did that.

And although during the war years the men were gone--most of the men were gone--we tried to carry on social life, we tried to play basketball--didn't have enough to play football, but we tried to play basketball. We had to play a high school [chuckles] basketball team, because travel was limited. As you may have heard, gasoline was rationed--

Millier: Right.

Davis: --and travel was very, very limited, so that we played high schools. [We did] things to keep up a social environment in the college community. I thoroughly enjoyed it. The faculty was very, very interested in trying to see that we made academic progress as well as social progress. As a matter of

fact, everybody on the campus had to belong to some kind of club.

You just couldn't be on Philander's campus in those days without belonging to some kind of club, because the philosophy was that you need to know how to work with and be among people. So you just have to belong to something and participate. You need to know how to plan and carry on activities yourself, and you need to know how to support others and carry on activities. So that was instilled in us in those days. And I'm glad it was, and I tried to follow that as an adult.

Millier: Yes. Were you active at any churches?

Davis: Well, let me say it to you this way: Philander is a [United] Methodist [Church]-related institution and there's a church just off the campus, across the street, as a matter of fact, now. It was a block away in those days, but the campus moved in. In those days we had Methodist Youth Fellowship, as it was called in those days, and then we had religious organizations on the campus. We had vespers as part of the college program, so that I participated in all of those.

I'll tell you, I did not join a church. My

people were all Baptist people. My daddy was--at the time of his death, we could prove that he had been a deacon of the Baptist church for fifty-some years. We established that. He had been a Sunday school teacher, deacon of the church and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. They were very active in the congregation. But I did not join the church. I would go to Methodist Youth Fellowship from time to time, and of course when I was in Philander you had to go to vespers, and those activities were on campus, campus-related. I did not join a church until I came here [to Fort Worth] in 1955.

Millier: Did you notice if the segregation in Little Rock was more pronounced than in Wilton?

Davis: Well, it was pretty much the same. Let me say this to you: when I came from the country to Little Rock, our address where my parents had rented a home for us to live in, was 117 East 16th Street. That's a half-block off of Main Street. In those days people sat on the front porch because we didn't have air conditioning like we have now.

When I was sitting on my front porch looking directly across the street in front of our house, where I lived, was a working-class apartment where

working-class white people lived. [There was] never any conflict or problem. One block to the west of Main Street was Winfield Methodist Church, one of the largest Methodist churches in Little Rock at that time. It was in what we called Quapaw Quarters. The governor's mansion is in Quapaw Quarters [chuckles]. I walked right past that every morning going to Dunbar High School.

I would walk five or six or eight blocks through that white section of town, and then we'd be into the section that was black, and then [arrive at] Dunbar. Dunbar was on Wright Avenue and Ringo Street. Wright Avenue was between 18th and 19th Street, but on 23rd and 24th Street was a middle-class neighborhood of white people. See? So Dunbar was located about four or five blocks from middle-class white people.

But there was not this great conflict at all. We attended our business, they attended theirs, and there was no such thing as you were afraid to walk through the neighborhood, that they were going to rock you [or] do mean things to you. You'd walk right on through there, no problem. I never had a problem at all, never felt threatened going through that

area, going to Dunbar.

Now, two blocks away from where we were living was a white--I don't remember now whether it was an elementary school or a junior high school--two blocks away from where we were living, you see. So you could go a few blocks in almost--in many directions and you'd run into a neighborhood of black people, and a few more blocks and you'd run into a neighborhood of white people.

Dunbar played football games out at the stadium at Central High School, [which was then all-white]. Although we didn't go to Central High School, our football games were played at the stadium at Central High School. Now, we were segregated. We sat at the back of the bus, but we could go to department stores. You didn't eat in the cafes or cafeterias and all that. No, we could not do that, but there was no open hostility and brutality so that you are afraid to walk down the streets or you were unsafe walking down the streets, day or night, in terms of racial animosity. That was the situation in Wilton, Little River County, where I was born, and that was the situation in Little Rock.

Now, you talk about the crisis in 1957:

Arkansas was--Little Rock was totally prepared to do it [integrate schools] without all of this controversy. It could have happened. We started filing integration law suits in 1950 in Arkansas. Now, of course they would say the statute provides it, and the law requires it, but we got improvements in our schools. As a matter of fact, in one, in Helena, Arkansas we got a whole new school in a different location as a result of it. It was part of the adjustment. The first one we filed was, I believe, in DeWitt, then I believe we filed one in Mayflower and Holly Grove or Honey Grove, I've forgotten which, then in Bearden, Arkansas, and then Helena. [Editor's note: as the NAACP filed anti-segregation suits in the early 1950s in several southern and border states, Arkansas and other states embarked on programs to build new schools for African Americans and raise the pay of African American teachers. They hoped that by bringing the schools closer to a separate-but- truly-equal standard they could convince the courts that integration was unnecessary.]

Now, after the [*Brown v. Board*] 1954 decision, I had come to Texas, but I still had my case pending

in Bearden, [Arkansas], and I was back there when we were planning how we were going to attack it. And we elected to go against the Little Rock system because we said if we could break down at the biggest and the best, then we wouldn't have to go against all these little independent school districts all over the state. That's why the big brush was at Little Rock, and I was in on the planning of that strategy, [chuckles] although I had come to Texas.

Millier: So what had made you decide to become a lawyer?

Davis: One, when I was in the country I looked at the train and the engineer, and I decided I wanted to travel and thought that would be a good way to do a lot of traveling, as an engineer of a train. When I got to Little Rock, there was a lawyer named Scipio A. Jones.

Scipio A. Jones had been--we'd heard about him. As a matter of fact, he'd come to our community on a speaking tour at one time when I was still living down home in Wilton. But when I got to Little Rock, I got to see him and see where he lived. This was in the 1939-1940 timeframe. He lived in a two-story brick house over on 21st or 22nd Street in that neighborhood near Dunbar in a brick house with a

tile top, and he drove an automobile called a LaSalle. They stopped making those about that period of time, but it was sold at the same place the Cadillacs were sold, but he drove a LaSalle. And from that inspiration, what he had done--he had defended some boys charged in the Elaine Riots in the 1920s, before I was--about the time I was born, but the history of it.

And then, when I was in college, one of my professors who taught--I was a business major--my professor who taught some of the courses was Mr. Booker, who was a lawyer. And, of course, out of that inspiration I developed a desire to become a lawyer, from those two individuals, primarily Scipio, but Scipio and Mr. Booker.

Millier: So then, what was your thought process as you were looking at law schools?

Davis: Well, of course, in those days, obviously I couldn't go to law school in Arkansas. But after the *Gaines* decision in the late 1930s, *Gaines v. Missouri* [sic; *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*], the decision was that the states had to provide opportunities for all of us. So what many of the states decided to do was they would pay your tuition [at an institution

outside of the state]. If a course was offered in there for whites that was not offered for blacks-- "negroes," as we were called in those days--they would pay your tuition wherever you were able to go. So I elected to try and go to Howard [University, in Washington, D.C.], and was enrolled at Howard. And they paid my tuition for the three years that I attended Howard plus the one year of graduate school at Atlanta University. The state of Arkansas paid my tuition.

Now, let me mention how this developed that I got involved in integration in the University of Arkansas. The *Sweatt* case [*Sweatt v. Painter*] was going on here in Texas, and the *Sipuel* case [*Sipuel v. Board of Regents of University of Oklahoma*] was going on in Oklahoma, and a fellow named Honeycutt was pursuing [a suit] in Louisiana. I was in Washington in my first year [of law school]. Of course I was reading the paper. Remember, I told you earlier I had been trained to read the papers every day, and I was reading the [Baltimore] *Afro-American*, the Chicago [*Defender*], and the Pittsburgh *Courier*. And Washington had a black paper. I was reading about all this, so I decided I would write

to see if I could go to the University of Arkansas.

So in the spring of 1946, which was in the second semester of my first year in law school, I wrote and asked for an application for the [University of Arkansas] Law School and submitted an application. As best I remember, when it got down to race I just wrote, well, "mixed," but when the [application asked to] show your high school [and college, I wrote], "Dunbar High School in Little Rock, Arkansas and Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas." They knew I was a Negro. The dean, who was named [Robert A.] Leflar, wrote back and said they didn't admit blacks to law school, and suggested that I try Arkansas State [Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal College, now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff].

Well, I knew that Arkansas State at Pine Bluff didn't have a law school, but I wrote the president at Pine Bluff that I wanted to go to law school. He wrote me back and said they didn't have a law school at Arkansas State and suggested I consider the out-of-state aid program. Okay. The fall of 1947, instead of going back for my second year of law school, I elected to go to Atlanta University and

continue my correspondence with the dean at the University of Arkansas Law School, Dean Robert Leflar. The state paid my tuition at Atlanta University where I was pursuing economics. I went that school year there, but continued my correspondence.

The fall of 1947, I went back to law school; it was my second year, and I kept my correspondence. In the meantime, at some point, Dean Leflar had indicated that they would make an arrangement for my admission. In the fall of 1947, late fall of 1947, he wrote me and advised that they were making plans for my admission in January 1948, the next semester. But he wanted me to pay my tuition in advance because he didn't want to go through all this preparation if I was not coming. I at that point gathered all my paperwork and letters I had written, and the correspondence I had received, and carried them to the dean of the law school at Howard, and told them the sequence of events. They dictated up a letter for me to respond which said succinctly that we had reviewed the catalog and that was not a requirement of anybody else, and I would not comply with that requirement, to pay tuition in advance.

This was in the late fall, October, November, somewhere along in there, 1947. I never heard anymore from them at all. Howard Law School was on the semester system, so I was in the second week of my second semester of my second year. And they called a press conference at the University of Arkansas and announced that a colored person from Little Rock had applied, and if I showed up, they would admit me to the law school.

Now, Mr. Harold Flowers, who was a lawyer practicing in Pine Bluff, Arkansas--there was a young man named Hunt who had finished at Arkansas State and intended to go to the University of Indiana. [Flowers] got Hunt and Wiley Branton and carried them up there. Wiley wanted to enroll at the business school [as an] undergraduate, and Hunt in the law school. So they admitted Hunt to the law school, but they told Wiley, "You can get an undergraduate [degree] in business at Arkansas State, so go on back down to that." In January 1948 Arkansas enrolled Hunt in the law school.

So far as I know, it was the first and only southern state that integrated *without* litigation, in 1948. A lot of years passed before some of the

other states integrated, but Hunt was admitted. There's a long story about the circumstances in which he was taught, but at least he was admitted. That supports my theory that Arkansas, although it was segregated [chuckles] and a part of the South, it was not the bitter ugliness that many other southern states practiced. It had a higher grade of human relationships than a lot of other states.

Millier: So then--

Davis: Although it was segregated, it was less *depressing*, less *hostile*.

Millier: So then why do you think that in 1957, when those nine students were blocked from entering Central High--

Davis: My understanding is this: the senator from Arkansas was not seeking reelection. [Orval] Faubus was governor; he wanted to succeed him as senator. The White Citizens Council was being organized throughout the southern part of the United States. Sometime during the summer of 1957, one of the leaders of the White Citizens Council movement made a tour of Arkansas. I guess he was touring other states too, but he made a tour of Arkansas drumming up support [for keeping the races segregated in

schools and other areas] and blah, blah, blah about integration, because, you see you'd had the 1954 decision and then you'd had the decision about integration in Arkansas. So he made this tour and got the people all upset, and apparently Faubus felt that if he took sides that way, it would almost assure him of the success in that race for the Senate. Now, I was told that. I was in Texas, you see, but I was told that.

Faubus was brought out of a small town--I forgot the little town he was brought out of--by the governor in the late 1940s [Sid McMath] who was a so-called liberal. A liberal governor, southern governor at that time. [Faubus] was brought into government [as director of the Arkansas Highway Commission] at that time by that governor--I can't think of his name. But at any rate, he stayed in government and ultimately got elected governor. I'm told that that was his motivating factor.

Now, I'm also told that when he let it be known that he was going to try to block [the federal court's order to desegregate Central high School], [Winthrop A.] Rockefeller, who had taken up residence in Arkansas and who had been appointed

over the Arkansas Industrial [Development] Commission to try to help industrialize Arkansas, I'm told that he went to his office and tried his best to persuade him not to do it. I'm told also that the congressman--I can't think of the congressman's name from Little Rock--also tried to persuade him not to do it.

But he felt so strongly about his urge to be senator, and that this would ensure him of election, that he did it for that purpose. I don't know. But that was the rumor. I can believe that, yes, there would have been a few ruffled feathers, but [integration] could have happened in Little Rock short of what did occur, without all that.

Millier: By the time you graduated from Howard Law, had you decided that you wanted to pursue equality law?

Davis: Let me call your attention to the fact that the philosophy that was instilled in us in those days was that lawyers were social engineers and it was our job to try to use the principles of law to help bring about equality and opportunity for *all* people, not just black people. Of course we were at the urging of black people, but it's for *all* people. This is a thing that we have not gotten white people

to understand, that this thing benefits the total society, not just the blacks or Mexican-Americans or the Indians, but it benefits the total society. We *all* had instilled in us the notion that we were to do everything we could to try to make the society work for *all people*.

And so I went with that idea, but it was strengthened by my training. And I believe in using the tools that are available to *try to make society better*. As a matter of fact, I have my own term that I use: we talk about "civil rights," but my term is "*civil responsibility*," because that *puts it on everyone as an individual*. You see, when you start talking about civil rights you're talking about what to do for me or something whole, but when you're talking civil responsibility you're talking about what *I* ought to do to try to push the society forward.

[Speaking passionately] What do *I* do? That's my responsibility to work, it's *my* responsibility to help in community organizations that provide for wholesome activities for all people, that's *my* responsibility and that's a responsibility for everybody. And I call it socio-economic

responsibility, and I capture it with the words "civil responsibility." Equal opportunity economically, equal opportunity to participate in the society, equal opportunity for education, an equal chance for everybody to move forward.

Let me tell you one of my--you know, we all [chuckles] say things to ourselves, our thoughts. A few years ago, I was on a plane coming from California back home, and the stewardess was an old, ugly white woman. Excuse my--[laughter] excuse my language, but I'm telling you what I said to myself: "You know, she better thank her God for the [1964] Civil Rights Act and the Equal Employment Act, because [otherwise] she would have had to retire twenty years ago." Because, you know, years ago the stewardesses had to have a certain height, a certain weight and a certain age, and when they got thirty, thirty-five years old they had to go. And here was a woman who was fifty-five, sixty years old and was old and ugly and showing it. And I said to myself, "Look what the Civil Rights Act did for her."

And we haven't gotten white people to understand that these movements benefit them too. *They* get Medicare; *they* get the healthcare; *they* get

the benefit of social security; they get advocates for equal pay. [Chuckles] You see? And I've--in recent years, I've stopped using terms "civil rights" and I've substituted the term "civil responsibility," and what I call the socio-economic responsibility of every individual.

Millier: Okay, I like that. So once you graduated from Howard Law, you returned to Arkansas to practice. Can you tell me a little bit about your time in Arkansas?

Davis: Okay. When I came back, I took the bar on the 27th-28th of June, 1949. And went to the hospital on the 6th day of July, and had that bone that I had--had that corrected. And the Arkansas Supreme Court in those days recessed for the summer on the first Monday in July. The first Monday of July that year was July 4, so they convened long enough to announce their recess, but they entered an order that all us who took the June bar and passed to be admitted as of the day of their adjournment. Therefore my Arkansas license [to practice law] date is July 4.

Now, Mr. Flowers, the one who carried Hunt up to the University of Arkansas, invited me to join him and practice in Pine Bluff, so I joined him the first week of August, 1949. It was he who was busy

with the NAACP and all those other civic organizations in Arkansas trying to push things forward. As a matter of fact, he got a copy of a petition to integrate from South Carolina and put it on my desk and said, "Here, you make this pleading for Arkansas." So I did the revision so as to make the pleading—developed the pleading for the integration in Arkansas. That's why I told you we started filing integration lawsuits in Arkansas in late 1949, 1950.

I stayed with him. And you remember the Vietnam War [sic; Korean War] broke out in 1950. I was still single, and I had had corrected my foot, and I was still subject to the draft. So I undertook to volunteer and they were going to draft me, so I closed my office with him to get to the draft, but I got rejected. There's a long story of how I got rejected, but I had closed my practice with him.

So I elected to go down to Camden, Arkansas. Camden, Arkansas, was an industrial town [with a] population of 15,000 or more for the city. I went down there to practice. Arkansas in those days was primarily agriculture and the timber industry, and I practiced there until 1952 when I wanted to get

into a larger community.

But I had to relocate, and I elected to relocate to Texas. But I had to set up residence and take the Texas bar. So I [applied] and got a job teaching at Paul Quinn College in Waco, [Texas]. I came to Texas on Labor Day weekend 1952, and taught at Paul Quinn, set up my residence, and took the bar, and ultimately passed in 1953. And by the time I got the notice I had passed in late summer 1953, I stayed there and taught the school year 1953-1954, and came here to practice in June of 1954.

I came here on June 2 and they sent my draft notice--drafted my fanny into the army. I think they handed it on the 9th day of June. It took me six months and three days to get out of that, but I came back here to practice. And started back on January 21, 1955, and I've been here practicing ever since.

Millier: And in 1955 Juanita Craft organized the picketing of the State Fair [of Texas].

Davis Yes, in Dallas.

Millier: Were you acquainted with Juanita Craft at all?

Davis: I later met her before she passed. She was very, very active in the NAACP, statewide, and it was in that capacity that I met her and learned to admire

her in her efforts. I knew about the State Fair situation and Negro Day at the fair [laughs].

Millier: Right.

Davis: I did not go, but I knew about it.

Millier: Were there any sit-ins or picketing you did go to?

Davis: Not at all. And let me tell you: you see, I was practicing here in Fort Worth. When I came back to practice, there were two local lawyers who had come in: Ollice Malloy, who later became an Assistant District Attorney and Harold B. Jones, who later left the area. So Ollice Malloy went into the D.A.'s office in 1958, and Jones left the city by that time. So I was the only black person around practicing. There was an elderly gentleman who had been here for years, but he was seventy-five, eighty or more years old, just about faded from practice.

During the civil rights movement--the NAACP and all that and such activities that were carried on-- I elected to remain out [of public protests], because if people got put in jail, I would be the only one around to try to help get them out. And I didn't need to be in jail myself. And for that reason, I would support it, and go by and watch, but I wouldn't participate. We picketed Leonard Brothers

[Department Store], we had marches and things like that. But I did not picket or march, because I was keeping myself in position to start to try to get [people out] if we got people picked up and put in jail and what have you. Fortunately, we didn't have those experiences around here in Fort Worth.

Millier: So what did you look for when you took a case?

Davis: You look for ways to try to get relief and remedy what we called an injustice. We have participated in a broad range of activities. We've fought for housing--as a matter of fact, I brought a lawsuit to get the first family to move in there, in that section of housing down on Altamesa [Boulevard]. I can't think of the name of the addition, but it's Altamesa--west of the freeway--at Altamesa Boulevard, along in there. I brought a lawsuit for that family, to get that family in there. I worked with the black real estate association to help push and open up housing. I was part of the litigation against General Dynamics for employment out there. I have filed complaints against General Motors about employment. So we tried to touch bases on a number of things. We negotiated with the city about police activity, and of course, I handled the Mansfield

case, as well as the Fort Worth schools case.

[Chuckles] We have been active trying to open the society for full participations for all people. And that's all we want, we want full participation and opportunity for everybody. No favoritism, no breaks, just opportunity for one based on one's talents, skills, and ingenuity. And that's what I advocated, and that's what I advocate for, to *this day*.

Millier: With the Mansfield case in 1956, why did you choose [Nathaniel] Jackson to be [the plaintiff in the desegregation suit, *Jackson v. Rawdon*]?

Davis: Well, let me explain to you the genesis of that litigation. One, the school down there for blacks was up to the eighth grade. The school itself was located on a main country road. The kids who finished eighth grade down there--if they wanted to go to further education, they had to fight it themselves. And they had to catch the Trailways bus and come to the Trailways Station here, and get over from the bus station to [I.M.] Terrell High School. You must remember, in those days Terrell High School was the only high school for black people in Tarrant County. So the kids from Grapevine, Arlington and Aledo and

Mansfield and all when they got here--

Millier: And I believe they were bused in from Hood County.

Davis: When they got--they had to come here. So the people down there asked the school board for two or three little things; it was very simple. One, provide transportation for those kids to come to Terrell, that was one. Two, there were some things they wanted them to do in the school [for African American children], a water system and things like that. One thing, which was tremendously important, because they were on that country road, and kids have recess and would get out there playing, and they were afraid some kid out there playing would run out in that road and may get hit by a car. So they asked them to put up some kind of little barrier so the kid couldn't run out there, a little fence or some kind of barrier. Some simple things like that that wouldn't have cost a lot of money. The most expensive one would have been to provide transportation, but the other stuff was peanuts. And the school board refused to do any of it. *Not one move* would they make on any of the simple requests like that.

They invited me in and discussed the matter with me. And we filed a suit, because the 1954

decision had come down. We filed a lawsuit on it, and *they* selected the people that were going to be parties to it, to litigation. We had three people-- I don't remember the names now--but Jackson and Lawson and somebody--Moody. Moody was related to Mr. Moody, who was over the NAACP chapter down there-- he was, I think, a nephew. Moody and two other fellows [were the plaintiffs].

But we filed a lawsuit and we were denied at the [U.S.] District Court level, and we appealed it to the [U.S.] Fifth Circuit and got it reversed with an order to integrate. We came back and the court entered an integration order in 1956, and of course when we went down there on the day of school opening the mob congregated, and of course it wasn't safe to go down there. They didn't integrate until a number of years later when the government threatened to cut off their funding. Now they're proud of the fact that they did integrate [chuckles], and blacks live in many, many places about the city now, and work in city government in a lot of places down there.

Millier: And for the [case that challenged segregation in the] Fort Worth ISD, *Flax v. Potts*, how did that one get set up?

Davis: Okay. One, I already told you, Flax was a military person, lived in military housing there [at Carswell Air Force Base]. The bus would come by and pick up white kids, and take them to the white school. They wanted to go to the school where the rest of the kids out there in the housing were going.

Now, the other party to the lawsuit lived down there where the Tandy Center is now; it was a public housing project. At that time there was an elementary school, Peabody--I think it was named Peabody, but whatever it was--three or four blocks away. But they had to go through the downtown area and walk through the downtown area, across the railroad, to get to Terrell--or to the elementary school that was over there, when they were three or four blocks away [from Peabody]. So that was the problem.

See, in those days we're talking about going to school nearest your home. Open it up, let them go to the school near their home instead of walking through all of these neighborhoods and what have you. You see, your kids from Como would have to catch the public bus, the kids from Arlington would be brought in by a bus, the kids from Grapevine would

be brought in. I don't remember how the kids from Aledo got in there, and the kids from Mansfield would have to ride the Trailways bus at their own expense. So it was a burden and it was unfair, aside from the difference in the instructional curriculum that was separate but unequal. You had that. So we brought [the suit].

What happened in Fort Worth after the 1954 decision: when we were talking about going to the school nearest your home, Fort Worth [ISD] decided, "Ah-ha, we can fix this." They had a junior high school up to the ninth grade in the Northside, up to the ninth grade in Como, up to the ninth grade in Stop Six, so [they said], "Ah-ha we'll just add a grade a year, and there will be a high school in every neighborhood, so [chuckles] they'll have to cut that noise out."

So they started adding a grade a year in the mid-1950s after the first *Brown* decision. They added a grade a year. And that's how we get Dunbar High School as a high school, Como as a high school, as well as Kirkpatrick as a high school. Of course, Terrell always was [a high school] since the 1920s; it had been a high school. That was a problem there,

and even though they were moving them up, the curriculum and what have you was different [from all-white schools].

And we took the position, and we still take it: if we are trained in the same place that you are trained by the same methods you are trained, you can't claim that we are unprepared for the job market. We got the same preparation for the job market as everybody else had. You see what I'm saying? Because we got the same training at the same place. [Laughs] So you got a problem saying that we're not trained like the rest of them. And that was all that was in the background and part of the consideration for trying to get integration.

You would be surprised at the white people who would tell me about things that were happening in their schools that they knew weren't happening over here. You couldn't expose them, you couldn't tell them--I kept anonymous letters about things, unsigned letters about things like that. But we worked with them, and I can tell you that one of the superintendents really wanted to try to work out a fair system of integration, but, of course, he was a hired hand and he had to do what his board would

authorize him to do, you see.

That's a thing that people misunderstand. You see things and you think these short-sighted people are the majority--well, there's a good number of these short-sighted people, but there's always been some good, fair people in the nation. I tell people all the time, there were people that felt so strongly against slavery that they were willing to go to war to stop it, just like there were people who felt so strongly that they were willing to go to war to *keep* it. There have been good people, and there's *still* good people. Unfortunately, the bad people get all the press and notice, and they make all the noise. And unfortunately, too many of us good people remain quiet.

Millier: So during this time--about 1960 is when a lot of the sit-ins at lunch counters began.

Davis: Yes.

Millier: Did you represent anybody from any sit-ins?

Davis: Well, let me say it to you this way. We did not have the incidents of mass arrests like they did in many other places. The story goes that when Kennedy was elected president and this public accommodations issue got in the forefront, he called together what

he thought was a leadership group of people--

[End of Track 1. Begin Track 2]

Davis: --to try to see if we could work out something. And among the focus was the lack of accommodation. We were told that during the discussion, whoever went up there from Fort Worth--and I don't remember now and don't know if I ever knew who it was that went for Fort Worth--but it was the top echelon, in-crowd, shakers and breakers and things of Fort Worth were the one who were invited. And that person [said], [in mock anger] "That doesn't happen in Fort Worth." Well, [chuckles] when news got back here that that person had made that allegation, they did not want it to get out, because it was absolutely false. So they began to make some adjustments.

Leonard Brothers had a downstairs eating place for blacks. The Greyhound bus station had a little separate room there, a snack bar for blacks. Woolworth's, which was at 8th and Throckmorton, I believe, had a separate little area there for blacks. Piccadilly was a big downtown restaurant, no blacks at all there. So that they got together and

came up with a system.

Some of the places opened up. Well, this presented a problem because you had to know which ones had opened up and which ones had not, because you didn't want to get in [and be told to leave]. Ultimately and fortunately, there were enough people of goodwill around here that we made some adjustments over time without the ugliness that occurred in many, many other areas. And that's to be noted, that we did not have the ugliness. We did make progress--slow, and we're still working--but we did not have that ugliness in Fort Worth that you had in many other places in the South.

Any other special comments, or anything you want me to especially address?

Millier: When Martin Luther King--1963 was a big year for the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Martin Luther King came and visited.

Davis: Yes.

Millier: Did you go and see his--?

Davis: I went--he spoke at the theater which was right next door to what was the Greyhound [station]. I've forgotten what the name of [the theater was], but he spoke there. I went ahead of time and got a chance

to meet and shake hands with him and welcome him to the town. I had something else that I was supposed to do, so I didn't stay for the meeting. Let me mention--I believe in telling the truth--the big leading preachers in the town did not go to see Dr. King, black preachers. Other people did, but some of the preachers of the big churches didn't really go to see him when he came here to speak.

But he did come, he did speak, good and clear. He had good attendance, but you see, he spent the night with Mrs. Felder, because we couldn't stay in hotels in those days, but Mrs. Vada [Phillips] Felder, who was the first black woman to finish the divinity school out at Brite Divinity School. But he spoke here, and then Reverend Hodge, Marshall Hodge, who was a Methodist minister who was one of the early founders in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and who led one of the chapters around here, was very, very active. He was one that led the picket around Leonard Brothers up there that day, and then when we had the march at city hall one time. And I remember some other things that we did.

We ran a survey about pricing, food pricing in the grocery stores. We made a study of that one. We

gave people--we had Shelton [?] stores, Winn-Dixies and Skillern [?] drug stores, and we had a list of what a can of DelMonte peaches, sliced peaches, a can of so-and-so-and-so, two pounds bag of so-and-so flour [cost]. We sent people to all those stores, just go down and price them, see what they are. So we identified the difference in the pricing [laughs] of the stores in the black communities from stores [in white neighborhoods]. Winn-Dixie had stores in black communities as well as one there on Riverside--Rosedale at Ayers and some others, one on Berry Street and then had one out on Seminary South and other areas, had one on the Northside.

We sent people to each of those stores with the same lists, bring back the price. You know [laughs], you could find something ten or fifteen cents higher in one place than another, on a can of peaches or something like that. We tried to break those down.

Then, of course, there was--Bill Saw [?] had a bunch of stores, but he was a local, small, he had two or three stores in black and white [neighborhoods]. Como was one [black neighborhood], and Stop Six. But you'd expect it, since he was small--but we were looking at the chains. What the

chains had--the difference in their pricing, what Winn-Dixie was charging on Ayers [Avenue] as compared with the price it was charging at Seminary South. Things like that. You'd be surprised about the things we discovered and helped correct.

Millier: Right.

Davis: [Laughs] Housing: I closed the fourth house a black person bought on Allen Street here in Fort Worth. In 1953 [sic; 1956] they bombed somebody on [Judkins] Street; I forgotten which one, I was in Waco at that time. We had a problem in Riverside, but we had problems trying to get better housing. And we fought the housing and pulled things together and maneuvered together to open up housing and move clear on the south side from--we moved from Myrtle and Morphy Street, which is three or four blocks south of Rosedale to way the other side of Berry Street, but we moved. Better housing for people. And then, finally, out in Wedgewood, we finally broke in there. Finally broke in out here [in East Fort Worth]. But I told you I brought litigation to get housing, group housing addition there at Altamesa open for blacks.

So we have worked in employment, in police

activity, worked in housing; we worked in education, we worked in single-member districts for the city, single-member districts for the school board; we worked to get blacks on the community college, the Tarrant County Junior College as it was called, system when it was initiated. As a matter of fact, I ran for the board when it was created. We have been active in political activities.

It was so important to try and get the junior college system available so that you could have-- that was training right here in Fort Worth, because there was no public transportation between Fort Worth and Arlington. So my thought was if we could get a junior college system going, they could ride public transportation and get two years of college. And then, of course, a junior college can tailor what programs to suit the job requirements in the community, and so we fought for that.

We worked hard to help support the creation of the junior college by asking people to go and vote, and vote for the creation of the junior college district. It was created, and we got a black elected from the word "go." It's the only political body in this county that's had a black on it ever since it

was created, in the mid-1960s. Right now Gwen Morrison is a member of the board, and is the longest-serving member; she's been on it about thirty-five or -six years. [Unclear]

And just to show you the benefit it's been for the community--you may not know because you don't live here, but I can tell you. Right now in this town the longest-serving member of the community college board--that's what it's called now--is Gwen Morrison, a black woman. The chancellor of the junior college system is a black woman. The chairman of the airport board is a black woman. The chief operator for the Harris [Methodist] Hospital downtown is a black woman. Two members of the City Council are black women, and the [state] representative from District 95 [Nicole Collier] is a black woman.

Now, they've got two strikes against them: they're a woman and they're black. And that is a result of pushing the--oh, I forgot to mention the chairman of the board of trustees of the school district [Christine Chadwick Moss] is a black woman, and the superintendent of the Fort Worth Independent School District [Walter Dansby] is a black man who

was born in Stop Six. [Chuckles] So that he's gone on from Stop Six to superintendent of schools. There's been progress.

The fire chief here is a black person, we've had a black city manager here. We have blacks in fairly influential positions, not enough, but we have some. Fortunately, the ones that we have are doing an excellent job for the community. [Marc] Veasey, the representative in Congress [for Congressional District 33], is a young black man. I say young, he's in his forties. We have made some progress, but there's still a lot of work to be done.

Jimmy Carter down there [in Austin] this week at the Lyndon B. Johnson thing [commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act being signed into law] was talking about equal pay for women. That's still an issue in this day and time. White women, not just black women, *white* women. That's still a problem. We haven't come to a point where we believe all people ought to be measured by their talent and skill and their ingenuity. We haven't come to that. And yet, in the [U.S. Constitution] we said we want to form a more perfect Union.

It is an evolving society. We're improving, we're better, but we've still got a lot of things that we need to do to help form that more perfect Union. My big criticism is we have been unable to get the masses of white people to understand that it impacts them, too. [Laughs] It impacts them, too. If you cut our social security [benefits], it's more of them than it is of us. If you've got low-paying jobs, they get low-paying jobs too. If we don't have some elements of climate control, they're going to be breathing bad [chuckles] air too! You see what I'm saying? It's not going to stop because they're a white person. They're going to have to breathe the same air that the rest of us have to breathe. All of us need to be working for the mutual benefit of all of us.

Socio-economic responsibility: *each individual has a responsibility, individually* as well as in community with others to try to make the society better. We can't sit around and wait for the other fellow to do it. We have to do it. Everyone has to do his or her share to make it a better society across the board.

Well, I've been talking, have I answered your

questions?

Millier: You have.

Davis: I'll be happy to address anything that I know, if you ask me something I don't know, I'll be happy to tell you. When I taught school, that was one of the first things I would tell my class at the beginning of the semester: "Ask me anything you want to ask me. If you ask me something I don't know, you won't embarrass me, I'll just tell you, 'I don't know' and we'll go to the library and try to find out. I'm generally familiar with the subject matter, but I don't claim to know everything."

Millier: What would you say was the most effective method, in Fort Worth, for getting change to occur?

Davis: That were some people of goodwill who would listen to reasonable proposals. I can tell you, [unclear] at the school board--he's gone now, and I can tell it. I couldn't dare tell it during his lifetime, when he was on school board. I had his private telephone number, and I could call him and I didn't have to go through the switchboard. If he were at his desk, he'd answer, if he were not at his desk there'd be no answer. We could get adjustments made that way. The public didn't have to know who was

complaining or who was requesting it. He heard that something was going on at a certain school that needed to be investigated, so he'd order an investigation. They didn't know where it came from.

He wanted to improve the school system, and I couldn't dare let folks know that I had his private telephone number. You can't do that. He's got to maintain the trust that the board puts in him, and if the board gets the impression--the public finds out that he's [speaking in mock anger] "cooperating with dem damn niggers"--excuse me, but that's what that other group would say--his world would be rough.

But if we had our points of contact--we ultimately worked out, even when Ken Dolan [?] was here, where periodically we'd have a morning breakfast down at the school administration building where we could discuss certain issues in the school system. By the ability to sit down and discuss some and offer solutions that both sides could kind of live with, it helped. We worked out single-member districts for the reelection of school board members. I had a lawsuit pending, but we ultimately worked it out, so we worked a settlement out.

We worked a settlement with General Dynamics about employment. Even though we had a lawsuit pending, we ultimately worked the settlement and got a pretty good little sum of money for those employees that had been discriminated against out there.

There were some people who made responses in a positive way, and there were those who never, never, never, they never--as George Wallace said, "Segregation forever!"--as far as they were concerned.

Let me tell you about when I came here. I could not belong to the [Tarrant County] Bar Association because they had a "white only" clause in the Senior Bar [?]. I was a young lawyer, and I went and joined the Young Lawyers Association. A law group here called Harry and Ivy [?], a couple of young lawyers and another one--I can't think of--I think his name was Welch. They were trying to advocate for my membership there, and I won't name the ones that vigorously opposed it.

They finally rejected my membership there--they did not have a race clause in their bylaws, but they rejected me because they said they met in downtown restaurants for lunch and the restaurants would not

serve me, so therefore I couldn't [attend meetings]. When that hit the newspaper, a lawyer named Richard Simon [?], who I did not know, called me on the phone and says, "I read it. It's wrong and we're going to work to correct it." And he and a lawyer named Gerald Walker [?] and a lawyer named Jed Wright Shelton [?] and a lawyer named Elvin McCline [?], I know--and there must have been others--quietly went to work. Finally in 1960 or 1961, somewhere along in that time frame, they got that clause removed, and the day they got it removed, a lawyer named Harold Craig, who later became Judge Craig, called and said he would be happy to help sponsor me in the Bar.

At that time--I believe Charlie Murray, who later became Judge Murray--I believe he was president of the Bar at that time. When I came here I couldn't belong to it, but after I served on the bench the Bar Association awarded me the Silver Gavel Award, which is the highest award that the Bar Association can present to a judge.

On the 8th day of May, [2014], they have indicated that they are going to present me with the so-called Blackstone Award, which is the highest award the Bar Association can present to a lawyer.

Which means that in the 1950s when I came, I couldn't belong. Now, I'm going to get the highest two [laughter] awards they can give. [Editor's note: See Appendix.]

Millier: That's wonderful.

Davis: The point I'm trying to make is, it says a few things about me, that they feel that I have earned them. But it also says some things about them, that they are evolving [chuckles]. "You can't belong, now we let you in, and you earn the highest honor we can give. We hold you up as an example of what lawyers are about." [Laughs] That's progress.

Millier: That is progress.

Davis: That hasn't been publicly announced yet, but it is. They told me. As a matter of fact, they've taken my pictures and all that kind of stuff for it.

Millier: Well, I just want to thank you. Is there any final remarks you want to make? You've answered all of my questions wonderfully.

Davis: Well, I still want to put emphasis on what I call socio-economic responsibility or civil responsibility. Every individual has an individual responsibility to advocate for fairness, equal opportunity, for justice, fair play, all those

concepts. You have an *individual* responsibility for that, for *all* people. Respect everybody, whether you know them or not. Mutual respect and goodwill for every--I broaden it to say "all of God's creation." You have a civil responsibility for that. And that's why I use the term socio-economic responsibility and I break it down to what I call "civil responsibility." An individual obligation. That's my theme.

Millier: I think that's great. Well, thank you very much.

[End of interview]

A P P E N D I X

"Longtime Civil Rights Advocate Given Blackstone Award"

Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, May 8, 2014

By Bill Miller

FORT WORTH — After a 65-year career, including 21 years presiding in courtrooms, L. Clifford Davis might consider slowing down.

But at age 89, he still works Monday through Friday in his law office, mostly, he said, helping senior citizens on fixed incomes deal with various legal issues.

As a young lawyer, in the early 1950s he was on legal teams that prepared court challenges for school desegregation in his native Arkansas. He later moved to Tarrant County, where he became a driving force in the desegregation of public schools in Mansfield and Fort Worth.

The Tarrant County Bar Association on Thursday honored Davis with its Blackstone Award for distinguished senior members who have demonstrated integrity and courage in their careers.

In an interview Thursday afternoon, Davis was humble and grateful. In discussing his accomplishments in the civil rights movement, he frequently used the word *we*, not *I*.

"We participated in bringing opportunities in broad range from housing to employment to public accommodations," he said.

In 1947, as a law student at Howard University in Washington, Davis successfully petitioned the University of Arkansas Law School to accept African-Americans. But, when the school offered him a spot, he declined, opting instead to finish at Howard.

After getting his degree, Davis returned to Arkansas where he passed the bar exam in 1949 and joined efforts to desegregate public schools. He brought that experience to Fort Worth in 1955.

Davis was the lead counsel for the NAACP in federal lawsuits that eventually ended official segregation in Mansfield and Fort Worth public schools.

"Let me say this: We did not have the resistance in Fort Worth that many other Southern communities experienced," Davis said. "There were people of good will in Fort Worth that would respond to our efforts to bring about fair play and opportunity."

But in Mansfield, the lawsuit's plaintiffs were threatened with violence and the schools didn't become fully integrated until 1965.

"I think Judge Davis' legacy becomes larger every year," said the Rev. Michael Evans, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield. "The gentleman who called on Judge Davis to come help him, T.M. Moody, was hanged in effigy – twice.

"However, because of Judge Davis' courage and tenacity, great things have happened."

Evans said a diverse mix of ethnic groups are now represented on the Mansfield school board and in the school administration.

"That has benefited all students – yellow, black, brown and white," Evans said. "And now we're one of the top school districts in the state.

"Judge Davis had a lot to do with that."

Davis was elected a state district judge in 1983, the first African-American elected in a contested judicial race in Tarrant County, according to the bar association. He was re-elected until 1988 and continued to work as a visiting judge through 2004.

In 2002, the Fort Worth school district named Clifford Davis Elementary after him. And recently, the Fort Worth Black Bar Association has renamed itself The L. Clifford Davis Legal Association.

Davis said he has been married to his wife, Ethel, for 58 years, and they have two daughters, Avis and Karen, who live in Arlington.

He works at the Fort Worth firm of Johnson, Vaughn & Heiskell. The Blackstone Award, he said, is a high professional honor.

"The thing about it is, when your peers speak well of you, it's really rewarding," he said. "And I'm the kind of person who, when people give me flowers, I want to still be here to smell and appreciate them."



SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM
RICHARD W. RODRIGUEZ

L. Clifford Davis, photographed Feb. 22, 2008.

Source: <http://www.star-telegram.com/2014/05/08/5805450/longtime-civil-rights-advocate.html#storylink=cpy>



L. Clifford Davis in his Fort Worth law office, April 11, 2014.