

## Transcript



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## ALICE HURLEY ORAL HISTORY

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Dedicated the memory of SC House of Representative

**Joseph “Joe” H. Neal**

August 31, 1950 – February 14, 2017



## Civil Rights Oral History Interview with Alice Hurley

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| Interviewee:           | Alice Hurley  |
| Interviewer (s):       | Tre Tailor<br>Karen Alexander<br>Ricky Taylor<br>Tony Kenion  |
| Location:              | Columbia, SC  |
| Interview Length:      | 37:08   |
| Supplemental Material: | Includes transcript, interview release form, select photos, video, art rendering by Rodgers Boykin, music by Byron Counts |

## Abstract

Alice Hurley was born in Charlotte, NC in 1934. She attended public schools in Charlotte until the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade. She went on to attend Palmer Memorial Institute, a private school in Sedalia, North Carolina. After High School, Alice went on to attend Boston University. From Boston, to Atlanta, to Columbia, South Carolina where Alice and her husband, Anthony established the Columbia Urban League.

In the interview, Alice describes her childhood memories of attending school and life in the segregated south, life as a young adult in the heart of the civil rights movement and her inspiration for establishing the Columbia Urban League.



**Alice Hurley**

## Transcript

Tre Tailor: Today is Saturday, March 4, 2017. I'm Tre Tailor, and I'm here with Alice Hurley. And we'll be talking to her about her life in civil rights activism through the years 1950 through 1979. Please tell me your name.

Alice Hurley: I'm Alice Wyche Hurley.

Tre Tailor: Where and when were you born?

Alice Hurley: Charlotte, North Carolina. When? In 1934.

Tre Tailor: When did you grow up?

Alice Hurley: In Charlotte.

Tre Tailor: Where did you ... Okay. Tell me about your educational experiences.

Alice Hurley: I went to public school in Charlotte. Then I went to, in the eighth grade, I went to a private boarding school, Palmer Memorial Institute, who was Charlotte Hawkins Brown's school in Sedalia, North Carolina, which is right outside of Greensboro.

Tre Tailor: Isn't that interesting? Did you, growing up in Charlotte, suffer any racism or discrimination? Did you experience any?

Alice Hurley: No. I mean, everything was segregated back then, I knew that, but it was just a matter of fact. Charlotte was always kind of quiet, laid back, as far as activism and that kind of thing. There was white water and colored water, and then there was white restrooms and colored restrooms. You know my mother and I used to go downtown shopping, and we would catch a cab home. I do remember that the movie theaters were segregated. There were two black movie theaters. It wasn't like in other cities, maybe here in Columbia, where the whites sat downstairs and the blacks set upstairs. We just had two black movie theaters, one on one side of town and one on the other. And I was kind of aware that I couldn't go see the other movies.

Except for that, my life was among my friends and family, so I really wasn't affected by it.

Tre Tailor: Now, did you experience any racism when you moved to Boston to attend college?

Alice Hurley: Not really. There were students there from ... There were black students there. There were Indian students there. There were Asian students there. A lot of Jewish students there. It was my first exposure to that many different cultures, because being in Charlotte, I just sort of was raised in the black community, you know. Then, at Palmer, all the students were black. But when I got to Boston University, there were students from everywhere.

Tre Tailor: Did you see any racism?

Alice Hurley: Not really.

Tre Tailor: Now after Boston University, you moved to Atlanta and started working in radio, WERD. Tell me about that.

Alice Hurley: Well, I was a communications major at BU, and when I finished, my aunt interceded for me to be interviewed for a position at WERD, which we call WERD, radio station, which was the only black owned. There were a black audience directed radio stations, but they were owned by whites. WERD was owned by the Blaytons. They also had a business school in Atlanta on Auburn Avenue, which was the main drag at that time, for black businesses up and down Auburn Avenue, so the radio station was located there, too. I worked there five years. I did mostly background work, but I did end up having a ladies' program called The Home Executive. During that segment, we would talk about menus and other issues related to housewives and women and that sort of thing. I enjoyed that.

Tre Tailor: Now, your time at ERD, did you, were you involved in any civil rights or activism, because during those times, as is now, the radio station and the church were really the meeting grounds, the impetus. Those were places where African Americans could go to get the information.

Alice Hurley: Let me tell you something that happened to me. When I went to work there, I was a few months out of college, so to speak, and that was the very beginning, this was in '61, of the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta. And one day, the students ... I lived across the street from Clark University in Morehouse and Atlanta University, and the Spelman was a few blocks over and Morris Brown was a few blocks away. They were all sort of in the same vicinity. The students marched from that part of town over to Martin Luther King Senior's church, which was on Auburn Avenue. And they marched I guess it was 20, 25 blocks or so from one side of town to the other. As they came down the street, they had to pass by the radio station to get to the church. And so, the studio was upstairs in this building, so we heard them coming, and they were singing and clapping. We all went downstairs to see. Well, when I got to the door and I saw these students singing and clapping, it struck me that I couldn't get out there and join them because I was no longer a student. I was a working businesswoman at that time.

But, I had very difficult time, at that moment, not wanting to just jump out there in the street and go with them and join them, because I still, in a way, saw myself as a student. But that was the moment that it dawned on me that I was no longer a student and that I couldn't go out there and join them. That was a very, a very pregnant moment for me, at that moment. I'll never forget it. I'll never forget the feeling.

Tre Tailor: So, did you just think that the movement was just for students?

Alice Hurley: No. Somehow, because I live right across the street from ... I knew the Dean of the school, Dean Young. He asked me to become a part of a group that he was putting together, an integrated group, of people from the City of Columbia. It was really under the sponsorship of the school at that time, but it was also an arm of the National Urban League. And so, the focus, at that time, was to bring the diversified segments of Atlanta community together to address the issues. So I did serve on that committee. One day, he told me, he said, "Alice, you need to be a social worker." I didn't even really know what a social worker was or what they did or that sort of thing, but he kept talking to me about it and offered me a scholarship, so I wasn't going to turn that down. So, I went to school full-time and still worked at the radio station part-time, because I had to pay my rent, board and keep. But, that's

how I got to be a social worker, by getting involved in the movement and then becoming into the awareness of Whitney Young and his identifying me as a good prospect for becoming a social worker.

When I came here, I worked first at Crafts-Farrow State Hospital. And then, as I began to have children, it sort of occurred to me that the school year was a better working situation for me than year-round work at the hospital. Then, I was really able to secure a job with Richland County School District 1, and I worked there for 28 years.

Tre Tailor: Great, now in any of those positions, whether it be working in the social work industry, in the hospital, or in Richland School District, being a social worker during that time, did you then face any discrimination or racism from-

Alice Hurley: Oh yeah.

Tre Tailor: Tell us about that.

Alice Hurley: Well, when I was working at the state hospital, it was at the time that it was decided that we must integrate. So instead of...What they did was they took the young black patients from Crafts-Farrow downtown, and then they moved the older population from downtown to Crafts-Farrow. So, then, Crafts-Farrow became a geriatric facility. The nurses began to tell me that the patients began to complain about being hungry at night. And they had no food on the wards to give them. So we talked about it, and it occurred to us that the younger patients who had been there, they could eat enough at six o'clock to carry them through to the next morning, but the older patients could not eat as much at one time to sustain them through the night, so they needed a snack before they went to bed. So, all of the doctors at Crafts-Farrow at that time were white, and they had their office in the administration building there. So, I went prancing over there and invaded their territory and told the doctor who was the doctor assigned to the building that I worked in that the patients needed a snack. As a result of that, in that discussion with him, they did put some crackers and fruit and juice and milk, that kind of thing. So, I just thought of myself as an advocate for the patients.

But when they integrated the schools, when I changed jobs and went to work for Richland 1, I was at a particular school one day, and I was in the ladies' restroom. This teacher came in, and she looked at me and she said, "I can't teach these children." And I looked at her and I said, "Why not? You're a teacher, aren't you?" I said, "Because they can learn." I got the message that she was conveying to me, and I wanted her to get the message that I was conveying back to her. Little things like that I encountered, yeah. But just blatant discrimination ... I mean, I never got arrested and I never got put in jail or anything like that, but I was always aware of things not being right.

Another incident occurred when I went out on maternity leave when I was with the school district. And when I came back, the social worker, male social worker, who had this certain position was leaving, and I was to assume that position, but then I found out that they offering me, were gonna to pay me less money than they paid him, because he was a white male. I just went to the finance office and told them that I was going to have Judge Perry write them a letter if I didn't get the right salary. They didn't make an issue out of it. They just took care of that. But if I hadn't spoken up ... A lot of times, we suffer things because we didn't speak up. Things still occur that you have to speak up for.

Tre Tailor: You mentioned Judge Perry. We know that he was very instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement, advocating for African Americans over and over again. Did you know him or you just knew of him?

Alice Hurley: No, no, knew him. He lived, we lived on Two Notch Road, and he lived just a few blocks over on Marguerite Street. His wife and I were in an organization together, so we knew him, both personally and professionally.

Tre Tailor: So you knew the person to call or the name to drop.

Alice Hurley: The name to drop, that sort of thing.

Tre Tailor: Right. So, let's talk a little bit about your marriage to Mr. Hurley and you all building together that family business during a time when the funeral home was one of the first African American successful

businesses in Columbia. I know that it was established by the time you guys had gotten married.

Alice Hurley: His grandfather established the business back in 1923, and when I came here in '61, it had been located on South Main Street, where is it the Thomas Sumter Building now? Anyway, what happened, that was Ward 1. And the city had condemned a lot of that property on the urban renewal so that the University of South Carolina could acquire it. My mother-in-law had found a piece of property on Two Notch Road and had moved there, but they were, you know, a product of the movement at that time. My husband had been in the Army, and his father had died and his mother was trying to run the business by herself, so she encouraged him to go embalming school, which he did. This was the year or so before we got married. So by the time we got married in '61, he was running the business, which he did up until the time he died in 2015.

Tre Tailor: Did you, were you able to bring some of your skills as a social worker to the business?

Alice Hurley: Not really. I really worked outside of the business, but when I retired, I became fully employed, although I didn't get paid, but I did work full-time with the funeral home. And, but. Before that, when I could, I would go on funerals or help out and that sort of thing, so I was always involved. I am a licensed funeral director. I did take the test and became licensed, so that kind of helped, too, because after he died, I had to do it by myself for a while before the children and I decided to close the business.

Tre Tailor: You and your husband co-founded the Columbia Urban League together. How did that come about?

Alice Hurley: Well when I came to Columbia, there was no Urban League in Columbia, or in South Carolina for that matter. I think Whitney Young came here, or I went to Atlanta or something, but when I saw him, I told him there's no Urban League in Columbia. He, at that time, was being groomed by Ford Foundation at Harvard University to become the executive director of the National Urban League. And I was still a student at the School of Social Work. He didn't say anything that first time. So the next time I saw him, when he came ... I think he came

here to speak. I told him, "There's still no Urban League in Columbia or in South Carolina." He said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to send you two of our field representatives to come in and discuss this with you." So he did. In a couple of months, he sent two of his field workers, and we sat in our living room and they instructed us that the way to get started was to put together a board of directors and that that would be the first step. And then, from there, they would hire a director, and then they would begin a program.

So, we... Tony and I, my husband and I, began to identify some people that we thought that would be good. They instructed us that the board had to be integrated, that it had to be both black and white, so we identified certain people such as David Wallace, who was a businessman at that time, and Alice Spearman and a couple other people. Then, we asked some of the black people who were kind of leaders in the community if they would be interested, so we got, at that time, Colonel Ordie P. Taylor, who was a retired Colonel from the Army. He became the first chairman of that board. He was chairman at the time that the Urban League was installed here. So we had a nice group of people on that first board, and that's sort of how. I became the secretary and kept the minutes and did all the correspondence and that sort of thing. And my husband was on the board part of the board. That's how it got started. It got started in our living room, essentially.

Tre Tailor: Why did you think there was a need for an Urban League in Columbia?

Alice Hurley: Well, you know, the NAACP, they educate, agitate, and they litigate. They identify the topics or the issues in the community that need to be addressed. But then, once you start litigating and you win, then where do you go from there? That's where the Urban League comes in. They come into the community, and then they identify the powers that be and they work to quietly bring the forces together, the need to address the issue and to do it in an integrated way. And so, that's why I thought that we needed the urban League here, because by the time I came here in '61, they were making progress, but it was only going to go so far if we don't have the mechanism in place to address the issues and to put in place those kinds of organizations and identify the people and get them together to agree on how to address the issues and to move forward in order to make things better within the community.

Tre Tailor: Are there any incidents or the situations that you can think that were memorable, particularly as far as the Civil Rights Movement is concerned during your time with the Urban League in those early years?

Alice Hurley: Well, when they came in, the first executive director was Daisy Dunn Johnson. They began to implement programs for job enhancement for blacks. One of the things that came to our attention was that in order to place people in jobs, they had to become job ready, because if the industry or the business was willing to hire, they needed an able workforce. So, The Urban League came in and implemented some job training programs and identifying people who were probably good candidates and the pockets within the community that they could go in and draw from to address the issues. So, I think that the first thing they did was to help this community to become job ready for the jobs that were available at that time. And, that's what they still do. For the industries that we're bringing here now, there's still a need for people. A lot of people don't know how to work. They don't know how to be responsible workers. They don't know how to protect their jobs. Not just to have the skills to do the jobs, but there's a certain job, I guess ...

I don't know the word I'm trying to use. But, but to become a responsible person. You can't work today and not work tomorrow and that sort of thing. You really have to develop the mindset that the job is very important if you're going to keep it. And, I think people now have acquired those skills, so now the focus is more on becoming skill ready for the jobs, such as when Boeing comes in or when these other big industries come in, the Urban League often will implement a job training program. Then, they also now implement a lot of programs for the youth to help them to develop, to become responsible citizens so that they will be able to be job ready when their time comes.

Tre Tailor: Did you guys see any resistance from non-African Americans because of your work with the Urban League? Did you guys encounter any of that?

Alice Hurley: Oh, there's always been resistance. I'm a person, I like to organize and start things, but once it becomes into fruition, I prefer somebody

else do the full-time job, because I still had my full-time job. That's the other thing. But I do like getting things started when I see a need.

Tre Tailor: My final question is did you see any difference in the civil rights climate or racism going from Atlanta to South Carolina?

Alice Hurley: They were two different communities. Atlanta, of course, there was a lot of action, a lot of activism occurring in Atlanta. As far as I can remember, except for what the students did at South Carolina State, and that was a little bit later, there was not very much going on when I got here as opposed to it was already occurring in Atlanta.

Tre Tailor: When you moved here, did you start any types of movement other than the Urban League, any kind of activism?

Alice Hurley: No, not really. I was busy. I was a new bride and becoming a parent and raising a family. I was new to this community, so I didn't really know it, as such.

Tre Tailor: Is there anything else that you want to share as far as your civil rights experience?

Alice Hurley: Truthfully, I was not an active civil rights person of note, but I do feel that I did contribute when I saw a need that needed to be addressed, and I still do that when I see something that needs to be addressed. I will call somebody's attention to it and see if we can't implement something, get something going. I don't go get arrested and that sort of thing, but I do feel that there continues to be a need for civil rights awareness. It may be more subtle now. It's even more difficult to identify, but it's still there. When I see it, I'm going to find somebody to address it.

Tre Tailor: Have you done that of late?

Alice Hurley: I'm doing it right now, and I'm not going to discuss it now, because I want to make sure that it becomes, it comes into fruition, but it is a result of something that I've been aware of lately.

Tre Tailor: Karen, did you have any questions?

Karen Alexander: Yeah. This is Karen Alexander. Mrs. Hurley, you and I talked earlier. You mentioned that the Civil Rights Movement was a student-related movement because ... Can you share with the audience what you shared with me about it being mainly students?

Alice Hurley: Let me put a perspective on something. During the Civil Rights Movement, when Martin Luther King was going from city to city and working with the sanitation workers and working with the different segments in Alabama and the marches and all, if you will recall, it was not middle class black people who were doing this. It was the students, the young people in the schools, and it was the people who worked like the maids and the sanitation workers. Those were the people who really put their necks out on the line. Middle class blacks did not want Martin Luther King to come into their community and upset the status quo. We all now respect and Martin Luther King is now a martyr to all of us, but at that time, he was sometimes a troublemaker. And to give you a concrete example, when I came here, there was a man named George Elmore, who had a grocery store on Gervais Street, and he went to register to vote. The white community shut out his resources for commodities to sell in his store and ran him out of business. He's buried over in the Randolph Cemetery. But this is the kind of thing.

The school teachers, because the superintendents of the school districts were white, if they knew that they were supporting the NAACP, then teachers knew that they would lose their jobs. What middle class black people would do, for instance, like with the NAACP, they would give their cash money, but they would not allow their names to appear on any register or that sort of thing. Now, your doctors, your attorneys, your ministers, they would openly support, because their livelihood was not directly dependent upon a white supervisor or somebody who would retaliate. But, in most of your cities, you would find that the black middle class did not openly support Martin Luther King, but they did support with cash money, and that's the way it occurred.

Tre Tailor: Any closing statements that you want to give about, like I said, the

Civil Rights Movement in general?

Alice Hurley: Well, I'll tell you the truth, I've lived a lot of history. And it has, to me, been a privilege to have lived through this era, because I knew what it was like before the movement, although I was a child. You grow up being aware of what you've lived through. And then, to have been a part and a witness to the Civil Rights Movement and to what is even occurring today, all over the world. I don't see that things are getting better. I was born in 1934, and we went to war in 1941. Except for those few years of my life, for the rest of my life, this country has been at war with somebody, ever since 1941. I mean, there was World War II, there was Korea, there was Vietnam, there was Desert Storm, all of the conflicts now. And so, those of us who are my age, we've lived with war in this country. Although, in a way, because America proclaims to be who it is, you don't think of it that way, but when you really think about your life and your growing up and the people in your family who have gone off to war or the people in your community who didn't come back, that sort of thing, you realize that we have lived through a lot of history, including the Civil Rights Movement. I really consider it a privilege to have lived through this era.

Tre Tailor: Thank you.

