

INTERVIEWEE: Athalie Range

INTERVIEWER: Teresa Wanna Alexandre

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Alexandre: Good morning, I'm Teresa Alexandre and I'm at Turner Tech recording Athalie Range. Can you please spell your name?

Range: A-T-H-A-L-I-E. The last name, R-A-N-G-E.

A: Okay. And today I'm just gonna ask you some questions about the Civil Rights Era and, like, your part in it. Okay. Can you please describe when and where you were born and a bit about your parents and grandparents?

R: Alright, I was born in Key West, Florida on the seventh of November in 1915. Both my parents- my mother and father- were born in Key West, however, their parents was born in the Bahama Islands, so that is our heritage and history, we go back to the Bahamas.

A: And what was it like growing where you did?

R: Well my-- the most of my growing up was here in Miami, we left Key West when I was still a very young child--

A: Oh, okay.

R: --and my memories of Key West were all pleasant. Key West was a very beautiful little peninsula set-- surrounded by water so you-- you went swimming almost every day,

which is what nobody in Miami (is?) [was] able to do, and Key West was just a very beautiful little place.

A: Was it segregated there at that time?

R: We did not know segregation in Key West, not in the days when I lived there. I remember we lived just next door to two little old white ladies who were both spinsters and they were very, very nice; we lived next door to a Spanish-speaking family. So there was really not segregation as we knew it we-- I'm Catholic, we all went to the same Catholic church up on Rocky Road in Key West.

A: So when you moved to Miami, where did you [both speak at some time] grow up?

R: But it was-- let me just say this: it was I believe an incident that happened in Key West, however, which began to bring about some changes and the Ku Klux Klans became active, not necessarily active but they made their presence known in Key West, Florida. My father became very, very unhappy with that situation and decided to move the family to the mainland of Miami.

A: And what part of Miami did you move to?

R: We moved to an area that is now known as 'Overtown'. This area is surrounded or bordered by Northwest Fifth Street to about Northwest Twenty-First Street, that's north and south, and then east and west it would be First Avenue, which was the Florida East Coast Railway at one time, and Northwest Seventh Avenue, which was the Seaboard; it was very peculiar that we would be separated by the two railroad tracks. And so that gave us our what we called 'The Overtown' section where all black people lived.

A: Okay.

R: That was before Liberty City or Opa-locka or Richmond Heights, none of those places were known of in the early years.

A: In 1966, you were appointed the city commissioner of Miami--

R: Yes.

A: --I have a picture right here in 1969 where you were-- where they made a park for you--

R: Oh yes.

A: --in Edison

R: Yes, I was appointed in nineteen-- I believe it was 1965.

A: And how did that happen?

R: Well, that happened because the urban renewal came to Miami in the very early-'60s and they chose to come through the populated area where all black people lived. As a result of that, many of the streets were torn up, many of the homes were lost and everything and the picture that you just showed me there, that shows the expressway coming over. There were no parks left in that particular area, but there was this great expansive land under the expressways, and so I, as a commissioner at that time, felt that the land could be put to some use by making it fit for children to play and at one time, we had very lovely park under the expressway between Tenth and Eleventh Streets. Another one came out over here on Seventy-First Street between Seventy-First and Seventy-Fifth. However, because times have changes and we go almost everywhere now, these parks were not kept up to a very great extent.

A: What did you, being a Negro city commissioner of Miami, mean to the Negros of Miami?

R: Well, it meant a lot to the blacks of Miami because prior to that time, black people expressed no interest in what was going on. The laws were passed, we were overlooked, our garbage was picked up whenever they got around to picking it up, many, many things that may not seem important now was just thrust upon the black community, street lights were very sparse, no sidewalks throughout most of the area, and as I-- when I became city commissioner and began to learn of what it would take to get certain things done for the community, naturally I went after those things. I have said on several occasions that as simple as it is, one of the things that I started in my tenure was a regular garbage pick-up. Can you imagine having to sit in a governmental body and fuss about whether your garbage is picked up or not? Well, that is what was happening. They were-- they had regular routes in the white areas for a bi-weekly pick-up, twice per week. And in the predominantly black sections, which was segregated at that time, you were lucky if you got your garbage picked up once in two weeks. So I brought about the idea of having this equalized and after a demonstration of sorts, that did come about and today we still enjoy the equalization. Now if you can imagine garbage being a equal factor, then you know how bad things must have been.

A: In this book, it says that you were and Father Theodore--

R: Yes.

A: --um live, uh-- what did you guys do? Like, what were your [both speak at the same time] relationship?

R: Well, we were into so many things, I don't know what the book refers to, but it was undoubtedly some--

A: Something about blacks and white-- equal right.

R: Yes.

A: What was that all about?

R: It was-- I can't recall right off-hand, but there were many, many instances where we had to go to seek the rights of blacks. There were sit-ins, there was-- down on Flagler Street, there were lunch counters where I recall very well there was a store called the McCrory's Five and Dime Store and you simply could not sit at that counter and eat if-- they had a nice lunch counter but you couldn't sit to the counter and eat. If you were shopping downtown and had a need to have a bathroom visit, you couldn't-- there were no facilities, you could not go into one of the areas- the office buildings or stores- you had to go from wherever you were all the way over to the courthouse, which is located on the east side of the railroad tracks and use the facility that was down on the lower floor-- in the basement. So, these were the kind of things that were important to people today-- uh, in those days, today it's different, people are interested in the markets, we're interested in banking, we're interested in everything that anybody else is interested in, but we -- but because we (would not?) so many privileges in those days, things that you would consider little and insignificant were gigantic to us during that time.

A: With you being the city commissioner of Miami, did you get any threats or discriminated by the other whites?

R: Well, I tell-- let me give you an example: black people began to become interested in the laws and what was going on once I became city commissioner and they would come to my home and bring their complaints and I naturally would invite them to come to the commission meetings. When they would come to the commission meetings, and I would be sitting there with four white men- they were all men at that time- they had the feeling

that whatever I proposed was what my constituents wanted and I was very fortunate that in most instances, they followed my lead such as if I brought an issue to the table, they would just look at me and everyone, whichever way I voted, they would vote. So, that was the pleasant experiences that I had. I did have some experiences where it was not agreed upon. I recall on one instance, we had the police escorts. Escorts that you see policing funerals even today, they don't have many of the city men because their needs are much greater now, but at that time, they had police escorts and I having been a funeral director as I am even at this time, it struck me that we were paying out all of this money and they would-- we as funeral directors had to pay for this service of course and there were always white officers escorting our services, so I got the idea that it could very well be that we could use black officers in the same capacity. That was a very strong fight because they felt that the police- the motorcycle squad- was simply not a black duty.

However, I persevered and the school board member today whose name is the Reverend Robert Ingram, who's our school board today, was a police officer at that time and he- because of my efforts- was the first black to ride a motorcycle and to escort funerals.

A: Great accomplishment. In 1968, what do you remember about the Miami riots? Were you commissioner at that time in 1968?

R: Yes. Yes. That was around this time. I think that was when the-- I think the Republicans were having their convention on the beach, I believe that is the way it was. And because of a number of instances that had gone on, we were very, very high on police brutality. Those were issues that was an everyday conversation. And many other differences that came about a riot. I don't know who brought the idea, but Miami had been spared a riotous situation through the early-'60s. You see, the riots began up in

other portions of the country and for some reason, the riots are things that the people plan and go from one area to the other and because there must have been some great misrepresentation in that convention where we were not being considered, there was some few people who were adamant enough about it to start an uprising and that is how that '68 riot started.

A: And, um, what else do you remember, like, about segregation at that time?

R: Well, I remember, uh, there-- I can only compare with what goes on today as to what goes on-- went on then. You never-- you never saw a black person as a salesperson in a store like Burdines or other large stores we had at that time. You never saw a black person in banking. You go into the banks today, you see black tellers, you see black vice presidents. So those are conditions that have changed tremendously because that was not a part-- you never saw us in any top positions such as Jackson Memorial Hospital now whose had for a number of years now Ira Clark who is a black professional and he is the key man, he runs Jackson Memorial Hospital. Even more recent than this, you've seen the little lady who is now operating the airport- I'm trying very hard to think of her name, I trust you've read it in the papers, I'll think of her name in just a moment- but she actually sits in the chair behind a desk and she's no taller than I am but she speaks with a loud and decisive voice, so those are things that we have to look on as having persevered through the Civil Rights Movement to be able to bring-- Angela Gittens is her name-- and that brings us to the realization of the fact that doors are opening and that anybody who has the vim, the vigor, the vitality to want to move up can do so because the doors are open and we can make progress. Politically speaking, we not only now have commissioners on a city level or a county level, we have people in our state legislature,

you know the fight that Senator Meek- Kendrick Meek- put up in Tallahassee for circumstances that were existing there. His mother- Carrie Meek- is a representative of the United States government. So you see, you can't look around and say, "Well, we don't have a chance." That's why it's very painful when we see young black people your age standing around the street wasting their time.

A: So, at the time during the '60s, were you, like, a part of any organizations like CORE or NAACP?

R: I am a member [school bell rings] of NAACP. It was before the '60s that I was a member of CORE. I was a member and I have joined any number of organizations that promote the cause.

A: So, like, were you-- like, what memories do you have about the organizations that you were in? Like the sit-ins and stuff?

R: Well, yes, the sit-ins I remember, I don't know whether I was telling you or the other young lady about the issue with the McCrory lunch counter?

A: [inaudible]

R: A group including my husband- who has now passed away- went to Burdines to be served in their lunchroom and they were turned away, but it just took determination. Reverend Graham was a member of that group, and they simply sat there. They sat there until they were served. There were many people who were a little weak-hearted and if the officers came in and asked them to leave, they would leave. There were others who just continued to sit. That is the way we were able to get many, many things going. Take the golf courses, where we have now the outstanding golfer of our time- Tiger Woods- we had a time here in Miami that we did not go to the golf courses other than to caddy- that

is to carry the bag for the golfers. But today-- and there-- and after that and when they began to protest and wanting to have-- to play golf, then they allowed one day a week on-- it was either a Wednesday or a Thursday that blacks could go to one of the golf courses and play. But because of perseverance, now we play whenever and wherever we can afford.

A: Did you have, like, any haunting memories of discrimination or separation of the races?

R: Well, not really haunting memories because I think they most like-- they mostly been overcome to a very (great?) extent. We had a situation where the schools were a very, very big issue here. For a period of about twenty-one years, not a school had been built for black children in the segregated areas and yet, we were segregated and still going to school. The Liberty City Elementary school, which was located on Sixtieth Street and Seventeenth Avenue was a school which has twelve-hundred children and it was comprised completely, completely of-- what do you call these-- portables.

A: Mm-hmm.

R: Was comprised of portables, they didn't have a lunchroom, they had twelve toilets for all of those children, they stood out in line, they began lining up at about 10:30 in the morning to have water and to go to the bathroom. The pipes for the water faucets were all on the outside, not a blade of grass anywhere to keep them cool. Consequently, children had to begin lining up at 10:30 in the morning to get a drink before lunchtime out there in the hot sun. It was at this time that I was president of the Parent-Teacher Association and of course we- Parent-Teacher Association's- did nothing other than handle little programs to entertain the children and it was not very much to it. But, when we saw the

(inequity?) were going on the school system, we decided to go to the school board and demand that they do something about the accommodations for black youngsters. It was at that time that we finally got the first school out here in Liberty City which was a permanent building equal to other facilities-- [both speak at the same time]

A: What school?

R: -- that were being built--

A: What school was that?

A: -- all over the city and that was Liberty City Elementary, the school which now exists on Seventy-Fifth Street near Twentieth Avenue. That school moved-- no, that's not the one. The one that's on-- just behind Dorsey, I believe [school bell rings] it is.

A: Mm-hmm.

R: That's the one that was built in order to accommodate the children and that was over a period of twenty-one years.

A: And what do you remember about Martin Luther King and did you ever meet him?

R: Yes, I had an opportunity to be in his company and naturally, we have to revere the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King. I don't know where we would be at this time in our history if first Rosa Parks had not come along and-- to encourage-- he encouraged her efforts and she encouraged him to take up the fight.

A: Did he encourage you, like, was he your inspiration for--? [both speak at the same time]

R: Well, I think he inspired anyone who heard him speak and-- speak of his dreams such as, "I've been to the mountain top" and things of this nature. I think anyone who heard

him who had any inkling of equality without-- without violence, see, equality without violence was his feeling and I think he inspired many of us to continue the fight.

A: How about Malcolm X? What do you think about him? Since--

R: Malcolm X-- I think Malcolm had his points. It's unfortunate that some of us see things one way, and the others see it in another way. So Malcolm X, I would certainly not down his efforts for what he wanted for his people, it was just his manner of expression that did not fall in line with some of the things that Martin Luther King aspired to.

A: So what was your reaction of the assassination of both Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King in 1968?

R: Well, surely an assassination is always a very horrendous and sad memory to have regardless to who is killed. I think the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King had a far greater impact, however, because he had touched so many, many more people in his time and he was on a mission at that time to try to overcome these things. I think Malcolm X, as I recall, had a little different history than Dr. Martin Luther King did. Consequently, I think that Martin Luther King's death had a far greater impact on the total community; it had an impact on the white community as well as the black community.

A: Alright, thank you very much, it was an honor.

R: You're very welcome. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW