ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
SYLVESTER BROOKS

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MACEDONIA, OHIO

INTERVIEWED BY ERIN TOOMEY
FOR THE MIDDLE TENNESSEE
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ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER
MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY
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Brooks: That's fine.

Toomey: Okay. What I thought we'd start out with is a little bit of your background just so we'd know where you are coming from. So a little bit about your family. I know you said you were from Memphis. If you could just talk about that a little bit.

Brooks: Let me start out, when you called the other day you talked to the secretary, and she said, "Isn't that [oral history interview] something people do when they think you are about to croak?"

Toomey: [Laughing] Actually, we are trying to get ahead of schedule.

Brooks: In terms of family, are you talking about parents?

Toomey: Yeah.

Brooks: Okay, I grew up—I was born in Memphis, and my mother was a principal and my father worked security at the Army Depot, where they stored various things for the military. I graduated from high school there in Memphis, and in those days, schools were segregated. So I went to an all black school, of course. I graduated in 1967; I was sixteen then because my mother got me into school early, and I skipped kindergarten because she could do that. There were pros and cons about doing that, but anyway. So I was kind of ahead of myself to begin with. Then I went to Middle Tennessee and graduated from there in 1970, so I spent three years there. Then I went to law school in St. Louis. I went to Washington University where I met my wife, who was in graduate school at the school of social work. She was from Chicago. So we married my senior year. She had finished her two-year program, and mine was a three-year program. We stayed in St. Louis for that semester with the jobs at that point and wanting to do something in the legal services area. I wanted to do that. I looked around the country, and it
just so happened that in 1973 a Supreme Court case came out. I forget the name of it, R. Sinker vs. something, anyway. That case mandated people who were accused of misdemeanor crimes had right to council. So that required defender offices across the country to begin to look for young people immediately, to look for lawyers. Not necessarily young people, but to look for lawyers who could fill those roles. Since it was misdemeanor work, it was more likely it was going to be younger lawyers. So I came to Cleveland with a friend. We were coming across Indiana, and we hit a patch of ice because we didn't know much about ice because he was from Dallas, Texas, and he was driving. The car did like a 360 on the highway, you know, on the patch of ice, but we ended up going in the same direction, and nobody was hurt. No one was coming toward us. Anyway, I got hired; we both got hired. He decided not to go, to come here. I came here, and so I went to work at the public defenders office doing criminal law. Over the course of that aspect of my legal career, probably from '73—August 1st was my first day in '73 and 'til about '78, January '79. I was a public defender, and during the course of that work, we worked with anyone from drunk drivers to felony work and murder, kidnapping, whatever it was. It was just a full gambit. So when these guys complained about casework, we used to see forty people a day in the morning. I think they were the best lawyers around because they simply knew the court system at that time—not now, but at that time they knew the court system, they knew the judges, they knew when a judge needed to get up all call a time to go to the bathroom. They knew when to make their point and when not to make. It was just that you knew everybody. You knew how the system worked. You knew the police, you knew the prosecutors, you knew who you could virtually ask the judge to do something for and they would do it, just on your name and on your word because they know they could trust you, and it could work the other way if they didn't. Anyway, so I did that. We decided to adopt two children, a set of twins, in '74. We started that process. My wife's name is Sam, Samantha. It just so happened that she was working at an agency, an adoption agency. Because another lady at the agency, another worker at the agency was going out to pick up some children—a set of twins as it turned out—to take them from the hospital to the foster care home. She needed somebody to help her because they were twins. So she asked Sam to go along with her to help with the kids, the babies. They were only four days old. So that's how she found—she saw our boys. So she came home and talked to me briefly about that, and we had talked about adopting children. We had been married a year at that point, and our parents thought we were off to consider this at that point, but on the other hand, if we wanted to adopt, we wanted to adopt first because we wanted the parents to clearly accept them. That was her theory, to clearly accept the adopted children before we had birth children, etc. So anyway, we adopted the boys in '75. They came home with us. So there we were. I was working at legal aid making twelve thousand dollars, and she was working at Children's Services making about ten thousand dollars. We had better money management then than we probably had many years after that given our brand new car was $77.71. That was our car, and our apartment rent here was $145.00 for a very nice apartment in XXXX, but things
were a bit different. In '77, we had a girl, Keena. The boy's names were Apakee and Nakia.

Toomey: Did you name the boys yourself, or did they already have names?

Brooks: They had names, but we changed their names. We got the material and went through the process—the court process—and the names changed, of course. So we named them Apakee and Nakia. Originally, they were Shaun and Shannon, and of course, they know that. I can say that because they know that, too. Occasionally, when one of them who tends to get in trouble with credit cards uses the names Shannon sometimes, and I know he's messing around as soon as they come through the house. Anyway, that's another story: kids and credit cards and when they go off to school. Then Keena came along in '77, summer of '77. I was there for that one in terms of the delivery. That was a new experience. Sam continued to work pretty much until Keena was born in '77. Then we decided it was just too much. So there she was with a masters degree, three babies, and just decided to stay at home with the children. Keena had some physical problems that required rather significant surgeries, about six surgeries or so before she was six months old. She's fine, and it's not life threatening. They thought it could have been at the time, but it turned out not to be. She's fine. I guess Sam got really attached to that situation. Anyway, she quit working. I didn't know she wouldn't work for another ten years. (Laughing) At that point, I decided I loved legal aid. It was like leaving a home. I loved the work, and I liked dealing with the people. I liked being able to do things. I've always been a people—I just like that kind of stuff. I really did miss it and think I told them in my letter of resignation that it like leaving home and that I was sorry to do that, but I had to because here I was making about fourteen thousand dollars and I'm twenty-eight, twenty-seven years old, and I had three children. I needed to move on. So I did. I've only had two jobs, that one and this one, and a paper route. Three. Well, I worked at the university at the library. I cooked in the grill. If the people looked at me as if they thought I was supposed to be serving them, I would not put meat in their food, in their hamburgers. I would just give them a lot of lettuce and then watch them when they would sit down and see the expression when they didn't have any meat.

Toomey: I'm not sure if they put meat in there now!

Brooks: That's what it is, I guess, now. Am I going too long with this?

Toomey: No.

Brooks: In 1980, our last child was born, another girl, Fonta Kahee. She was born in 1980, and she was fine. No problems in terms of her delivery or her health or anything of that nature. It was a big concern going in. So there we were with four children. I was reading something in the newspaper in late '78, and it said that Chrysler was considering pre-paid legal service. I had never heard of such a
thing, pre-paid legal services program. So I took the article and had a name and called. I didn’t know anything about this stuff. I was looking down in Warrensville. This place is down in Twinsburg. So, I just called down to the local, and this guy calls back from the local—Solomon Bowens, who is now in a nursing home. He called back, and I guess he gets to the unit early, like at 5:30 in the morning. He XXX My wife and Solomon, they just talked and talked and talked and then I come in for the interview, and next thing I know I’ve got a job, so that's how I started here. I came in a staff attorney. There's two of us. We primarily serve as the plant of here in Twinsburg—the Chrysler plant here—and at that time, it was a time when interest rates were very high, and Jimmy Carter was having his trouble with the oil situation, and it caused a lot of problems economically, and ultimately, along with the Iranian situation, probably caused his defeat. So a lot of people were losing their homes or a danger of losing their homes, and Chrysler was cutting back time and laying people off and that type of thing. I'm really proud to say that during that period of time, nobody lost their homes who worked over there at the Chrysler plant. We had favorable judges in the bankruptcy court who XXX not so much in Cleveland that won't credit it to XXX. I don't think anyone who represented over that period of time lost their home. It was new for me because I was a criminal lawyer, and so I got hired for a job that we didn't do criminal work. These people don't want to pay to defend criminals so to speak. We did a good job in Chrysler, and then in 198—well before that, this guy I was working under had this grand plan of—he was from downstate Ohio—Middletown—and he couldn't get his wife to move up here. They had a nice home at a low interest rate. He wanted to move her up here—the interest rate was going up—to buy some small house over here on XXX at a 16.15% interest rate, and it had like a four bedroom colonial down there with like a 6% or something, and she says, “No way, Jose, I'm not moving up here.” So his plan was to fly back and...he had this plane that he was going to like fly home on the weekend and that sort of thing. Of course, everything went wrong. He got the plane up here, and as soon as he got it to FAA to get it tested, they said, "You can't get this thing up in the air anymore unless you get X number of dollars of work. It's a danger; don't do that.” So he couldn't do that, and then he had to end up driving back and forth, so ultimately he could do it, and he and young boys—and they were at the age where at the age where they were beginning to get a little testy with the mother—and so he had to give it up, and next thing you know, I was the manager of this office. Which I had been pretty much anyway because he was so busy with running back and forth, and before I had it coming to me pretty much anyway. I was learning all new aspects of law from things that I had been doing, which were different than things that I had been doing at the public defendants office, so I had to learn a lot of stuff pretty fast, and then in 1963 giving what we had done with the Chrysler plant...

Toomey: ‘83, right?

Brooks: In 83’, giving what we had done with the Chrysler plant, General Motors decided to come on board, and that really opened up a whole big ball game because
General Motors is all over Ohio, of course, and all over the country. When you get to Michigan, it's just, you know, it's just everywhere. From coast to coast, there is a GM facility, and then in '85, Ford came along and then we had like the big three, and all of a sudden, we were, you know—so I got it, so I go it, on the ground level of something, and I was able to move along and then I became assistant director of the plant, which is senior management position in the plant. I managed our operations in Indiana and in the state of Ohio probably for about ten years—maybe less than that, about 6, 7, 8 years organized it. Then I kinda decided that I wanted to cut back on that. The big thing with me is that I was an only child, and I had a lot of things I wanted to do, and I was very busy about those things, very passionate about things I felt and political issues and social issues and those kind of things. But I was also driven by a personal need having been an only child to have children, and I did have a lot of children. Four now days is a lot of children, and I wanted to be a part of their lives, and I wanted to see them grow, and I found myself being on the road constantly, traveling. My parents were always busy. My father worked at night, and my mother was very busy as a principal and getting things done and that sort of thing. They couldn't get to a lot of games that I would play and baseball games and just missing and didn't want that. So I wanted to involved in that, and I got tired of having the kids telling me on the phone that he hit a home run today or he struck out three times, and I wasn't there, and I just said, “Well, that's it.” I wanted to limit what I was doing. So I brought my activities back to the Ohio area mostly so it would reduce my travel considerably, and that helped a lot. So it's been a job that has allowed me what I wanted, the independence to do what I wanted to do, come as I want to go, come as I want to leave as I want to, make my own schedule primarily. I go see the director, which I have to do probably in about three weeks. We have the assistant directors that have about three meetings a year and we go to Detroit, and other than that, we pretty much make our own agendas and make our own shows as long as we're within the confines of the general scheme of things. So, as you can see, it's a lot of independence, and that's what I really wanted in life, and I feel really blessed that I've been able to do that for so many years and not miss my children because it goes by so fast, and I've been able to earn a better than pretty good living and also have the flexibility that I wanted in life. Of course, my wife finally went back to work after ten years, and that certainly did help. She went back, and she's a very bright lady, and so she's now Clinical Director of the Gerontological Agency, and she's done pretty well there. So things economically are pretty good, and another side—I'm 49 years old now, all four of my children are in college, or just about out of college, or out of college or just about out of college. I've got one who's graduating—one of the boys—one of the older ones. They were like on the five year plan, and one of them is on the six year plan, but he, I guess, he's going to make it up. The other one graduated on the five year plan last year. Then I have Keena, the one who has some physical problems. God gives you something and then takes something and then he takes something. She turned out to be a tremendous athlete. I mean she was the kind of kid that you throw in the water and she swam, and she saw her third grade teacher doing a jump shot; immediately she learned how to do it, immediately. You put her on a
bicycle, she take the training wheels off the next day—you know, "I don't want
them." You know, that kind of a kid. So anyway, she got a scholarship to play
basketball in college, and she did play basketball at the college level, and then
after two years she decided she didn't want to do it any more. So, full scholarship
out the window. "Dad, you have to pay." So—but if she doesn't want to play, she
doesn't want to play. She said she's had it, but sometimes when kids play at such
a competitive level, they get burned out. I think the college level is unlike the
high school level. They really own you. You have to play year round almost,
basically. The coaches are different because it's a job for them, and if you don't
win, they lose their jobs. So they take it a lot more seriously than they do at the
other level. She made the conscientious choice that if she couldn't keep up with
the travel, the double practices, the play, and the academics, then her choice was
to do the academics, and I can't argue with that. It's many games and
tournaments, and I even took her down to UT to the Vols to their summer camp,
and she made one of the most valuable players down at the Lady Vols camp, and
she was receiving letters from Tennessee for a long while, but that's the level of
place she was at, but I think they got burned out at some point. I think she got
burned out. And then the other one, Fonta, she can barely walk across the street
without falling, so she's very clumsy, and a year she tried to live in the shadow of
her sister and tried to do the things that her sister could do, and she couldn't and
so she had to find herself. Sam did everything from pom-poms to horseback
riding to you name, we tried to do something to raise this child's self-esteem, and
finally we got her into modeling, and she did that and she just blossomed into
tennis, and we told Keena you cannot play tennis, only Fonta can play because we
did not want her to show her up in that. Anyway, she turned out...The point that
I'm making with Keena is because she changed her major and changed schools,
she's now a fifth year senior. So she's a senior in graphic design and Fonta, the
youngest one, is a three year senior. She's going to graduate in three years this
May. So, pretty much we're getting out the door on that, I hope. She wants to go
to law school. This summer she does an internship in Washington at the—and
people say call them an internship, not the executive branch—at the EPA, and so
she enjoyed that, and she'll be graduating. So, pretty much that's my family and
the long of it because it's six of them, it took me a little while to go through it.

Toomey: Well, it's very interesting. It's interesting to see how far you've come. So, now
we'll back up to MTSU, and before we get to the mascot issue, I know there's
probably some things you want to talk about to, but maybe we'll start out with just
your experiences there because I know you were in there the first couple of years
they started letting African-American students in there. So what were your
experiences—negative or positive with that?

Brooks: Well, I didn't know exactly where you were coming from other than the Civil
Rights and the...

Toomey: Yeah, I mean, we're really just trying to get a history of the school in the Civil
Rights movement, so I guess we do want to focus on that, but if there's other
things that you want to talk about that are totally unrelated to those issues, that's fine.

Brooks: So, I sort of made an outline of a few things that I wanted to touch base on because I was involved in a lot of other activities, and I just wanted to touch base on maybe some others with you.

Toomey: That's great because it will give us an idea of what kind of activities that were there then that may not be there now.

Brooks (25:00): I guess I wanted to start out with the decision to go to Middle Tennessee in the first place.

Toomey: Okay.

Brooks: How did I decide to do that? I came from an all-black environment, a segregated community in Memphis. Not that in most communities in this country still are not, or many of them are still quite that way, and the schools are going back pretty much the same too, but why MTSU? My parents were a little skeptical about it at the time because number one, I was away from home, and number two, it was a considerable change in the environment for me, and they were concerned about my safety. There were other concerns too. I understood that, but I had been involved in a lot of things there in Memphis as a youngster, and I had going down and got involved. They let me do voter's registration drives in Mississippi with groups. I had written things in the newspaper and gotten these responses from the Ku Klux Klan and—I have a copy to give you one of those—as an attempt to intimidate, I guess, and my parents later told me that people were calling. They never told me that until some years later that people were calling the house and racial slurring. Some people didn't know whether it was written by somebody who was white or black, and they were calling me nigger lovers and the other people would call it the other way because they saw it differently. He mention that Mother wouldn't quite walking the floor, and people and people wouldn't quite calling, and because I was a junior and my father is a… we had the same name. People at work thought maybe it was him. He started receiving trouble at his job, but they never told me to stop. They never told me not to do that even though it was causing them some personal issues on the job and perhaps a certain degree of worry at the home. They never told me about the things that were going on the phone. They never told me about the concerns they had on their jobs. They didn't restrict me. So basically, it was some years before they even told me those things. So they had a better sense of the potential dangers that were out there than I did. I'm fifteen, sixteen. You're invincible. You just don't think that it was the most XXX. Things were changing, and people were challenging things, and I wanted to be a part of that. The Civil Rights movement that they talk about—it was a great movement, but it wasn't a great herd of people. It was really a considerably small group of people, and a lot of them were young people. I would say the majority of them were young people who made that happen.
They came from the north, and they came from the south, and they came from XXX. A lot of young people were the ones that did that and made those changes, and it may very well be because people thought they were invincible and they didn't feel the pressures or the weight of history, but at any rate. So, they had those concerns about me going, and on the other hand, I had an uncle in Clarksville, Tennessee. I don't know if you know the geography of that—north of Nashville—and he was a principal at Burk High School. I don't know if it's still there or not. So he was close by. As a matter of fact, he was principal at the school when Wilma Rudolph returned in 1960 from winning the gold medals. I was recently looking at the HBO program, and she came home, and they were going to have a segregated parade. It was going to be the black schools and the white schools lining up behind each other. Wilma said, "No, if you are going to honor me, then it's going to have to be an integrated parade, or we won't have it." That's what happened in Clarksville. They decided to break that up, and they did it because of Wilma Rudolph. So, they had the picture on HBO, and they had a picture of my Uncle George shaking Wilma's hand. So it was a thing about black athletes and going through the history, and they were talking about Wilma, really, and it's just a flash of him shaking her hand as one of his students when she returned to her high school after winning the gold medals. Of course, she went to Tennessee State. So he was there in that area, and my mother had some friends who taught school that she had worked with in Memphis and had moved to Nashville, and so we had friends in Nashville, and so she felt reasonably comfortable that I could always go to somebody near by if I had some issues. So, those were some of the concerns that they had, and for me, I wanted to get away. I wanted to do something other than go to Tennessee State—A & I they called it then—because I wanted to push the envelope a little bit and to do that. It was not that I thought that Tennessee—A & I as they called it, Agriculture Industrial—it was just that I wanted to take it on. I wanted to walk in there. It was just the thing for me to do at the time and my mind set.

[End of Side A Tape 1]
[Beginning of Side B Tape 1]

Brooks: They carried me there. They brought me there, and I remember the day when I arrived in Murfreesboro. At that time, they didn't have that expressway thing. You had to go through Smyrna, and there was a speed trap and all that—that's another story. We got there, and we didn't have any reservations. See, back in those days, when you were black and you traveled, you didn't necessarily know what you were going to encounter traveling through the country. Even in Tennessee, and Tennessee certainly wasn't Mississippi and Alabama or Georgia, but it was still problematic. Because of that parents—my parents, my wife's parents—whenever they traveled, they carried guns. They always carried guns, but you just stash it on the side. My father in-law had a gun. We were married. Sam and I were married. This is a sider. I'll just go very quickly. We were married—23 years old at this point, maybe 24—and for some reason—her parents
had gone to the store or something—and for some reason, she had to go into their luggage to get something, and she came across this gun, and so she comes up with this gun, and we're sitting on the couch. Love couch, a two seater, and we were watching television, and then she comes in with this gun, and she is twirling this pistol, and so I take this pistol, and I look at it, and I turned the cylinder. The bullets—I don't see anything in it. So she points the gun at my head, and she says, “pow,” just plain. This is the thing about guns. Twenty-three year old college educated master law degree people acting like children. What can happen to the little kids? Anyway, so we're sitting there, and I said, “Don't do that, don't point that thing at me;” and I take it away from her, and I point it to the wall, and I pulled the trigger, and it goes off. Bang! It penetrates the wall and goes into a big stereo thing and lodges into the back of that in the next room. It scared both of us to death. After that, her parents stopped carrying a gun; parents always traveled with guns because they never knew what they would encounter on the roads, and they would protect their families when it came to that. People really had a misunderstanding about how black people were defenseless because they were a lot of guns out there, and people would use them. My parents and in-laws probably carried it no matter where they went well up into the seventies before they stopped. That incident, just totally, lead to that. So anyway, we arrived at Murfreesboro, didn't have a place to stay, and that's why I got to the society. So we come up on this motel that had this huge rocket-like place, I remember. It was off the square, up some main road, and we went in there, and they were reluctant about it, but they gave us a room, and the thing I remember is that they had this pool, and I had just taken swimming lessons when I was sixteen, which is much too old. So we get there to this motel and this pool—and I am not really interested in swimming; I'm not that crazy about it—but people were in it, and because they were in it, I wanted to get in it. So, I did. I had to make sure four feet of water. I had to make sure I wasn't going to drown, and so I got in the water, and everybody got out. I knew, but I just wanted to do it, just to see what their reaction would be, except one lady. The next morning I looked at her car plates, and she was from Michigan. The other people got out of the pool immediately. Then they came for registration. It was in the dramatic arts building, and it was a big auditorium-like thing, and then they would call you by major, and then you would have to go to a certain area. I just recall feeling very lonely and alone at that point, and people were staring at you because I could see very few black heads there, and it was totally new for me. Memphis is a city where you can drive around sometimes and not see a white face, except now there going down to Beale Street. If you didn't go out of your way, for a day or two, that's how American that city is. There are only three or four cities in the country that have a African-American majority, and I may be wrong about this, not just in the city, but in the metropolitan area, and that's Memphis, New Orleans, and Norfolk, Virginia area—a considerable, a large center of African-Americans in the community, and coming to this environment was like really different to me. I wasn't afraid of it, and I wanted to challenge it to some degree, but I was apprehensive, and I was uncomfortable, and I did feel alone. But anyway, they took us to this place, and we got registered and the rest of it. We received our
dormitory assignments, and I was assigned with a fellow named Eric Stark, and he was a black kid from Chattanooga—he had a teacher salary in Nashville, teaching some music at some high school. Eric was a sophomore, so he had been there a year before I got there. So we—and I'll show you a picture of that first day. They gave us these stupid hats—I don't think they still do that. They put this T on it for freshmen. They assigned us this room in Smith Hall. It was an old dormitory; it's still there. It was on the third floor, I think. But it was the only room that didn't have any windows. And you walk up the stairs, and the way it's constructed, you know, like this [drawing], and then there is this room that sticks out right here. And so they gave us this room, and previously, it had been like a storage room. So they moved their stuff out of there and assigned Eric and I to this room. I don't know any better at the time. I just knew that it didn't have any windows, but I didn't know that it was worse than anyone else's room. But Eric knew. And so Eric was just infuriated, and he went down to the first floor and talked to the dorm director. And within a day, they moved us to a room with windows. He said that the housing department had made that decision. He did not make that decision, and that he would make some changes, and he did. Just the fact that they decided to put us in a previous storage room. I didn't know better until Eric made the point; Eric was the one that made the changes. And so this fellow, another black guy—I forget his last name, Joe—he was from Indiana. He walked me around and showed me where my particular classes would be. And he showed me the gym and the football field. I remember him saying, “You don't want to go to many football games. It will be a unique experience for you.” I didn't know what he meant at the time, but I would find out. And I thought that was nice of him to do that. He didn't have to do that, you know. How did I feel? Like I said before, I was apprehensive coming from a segregated public school in Memphis where you received hand-me-down school books, and the white kids received the new books. And you would get what they got after they were finished with the new books, so to speak. It really was a matter of a system—coming from a system that intentionally tried to make you underachieve, I think. And it was a test between a system that tried to do that systematically and a test between that and teachers—these black teachers who were dedicated to making a difference with kids. Who would win out? They gave us these textbooks, but the teachers wouldn't use them. They brought in their own materials at their own expense. They taught us black history. The history book didn't have anything about our people. But I knew because they taught us. And no matter what kind of books came from the Board of Education, we had our own subjects. But they didn't know that. The board didn't know what these teachers were doing. But they were dedicated people, and these standardized tests would come in, and they would say that these kids are leading the excellence levels and this that and the other. And the teachers didn't buy that. They said that just some of these kids just don't do well on some of these standardized tests, but they can achieve. And they were dedicated like my mother was. They pushed us very hard. They were embarrassed by some of these things that they were saying that black kids could or could not do. I think they pushed us very, very hard. When I was in the ninth grade—excuse me, seventh grade—they took us in a program. And I had the
same English teacher from the seventh grade to the twelfth grade. And so she stayed with us, and that’s most of what has carried me most of my life is to go to the write. Because I didn’t not have good student ethics—I mean work ethics. I hated kindergarten. But they pushed me. I had the same math people and science people. They carried a group of kids through the whole system. And they knew exactly how we were progressing, and no one had to re-teach you something because they knew you. So I left Carver High School with the ability to write and to express myself with this pen, and I think it’s served me well over the years.

Her name was Fannie Johnson, and I never got better than a C from Fannie Johnson because in the program, she graded hard. I think once or twice I got a B, but mostly C+ or something, you know. And I used to wonder in the spring of every year during Spring Break. These kids would come back from college, and they would come back to Mrs. Fannie Johnson’s classroom. She’s dead now—died 3 or 4 years ago—and we would say, “Why are they always coming to see this lady? She’s mean.” But they all came back to see here. And the first spring after coming back from Middle Tennessee, know where I went? I went to see Mrs. Johnson. I never thought I would go to see her, but there I was. But any rate, I think that was—even though I thought I was ready—everything in the world had told us that you were going to have difficulty, you were going to be behind, that you can’t because the segregated system, that folks were bad. You know, that you were going to have a hard time. And so, even though you don’t believe that because it’s been said so many times, it’s been public so many times, part of your mind, you have to consider that. So there was some apprehension, but I learned pretty quickly within the first semester that I could do this work, and I could do as well as most of the kids there if not better. Of course that all I needed to know to change my habits in terms of studying and then I could do other things and involve myself in other things that when I began to do other activities. I had played baseball in college. In fact, we had been state champions in the black—everything was black and white then. There was a black tournament and a white tournament. In the black high school tournament, we had been state champion for the previous three years. 1967, my last year in high school, was the first year they integrated the tournament for black and white high schools, and so we all came into one tournament, and we won the western tournament for Memphis, that whole western region. We went to the state tournament, was in Kingsport, which is way across the state. We traveled almost 1000 miles going back and forth just for this high school tournament, and it was just amazing the difference between the money that the state was giving to the black tournament than what they had been giving to the kids all those years were going and traveling to the regional champions for the white tournament. I mean, our parents before that had been giving money to spend, and we had to pay for our housing, and we stayed in these crumby places where rats were and roaches would come out of the faucets before the water came out. We didn't have any money. The year we won the regional of Memphis, then they had to give the money to us, and all of a sudden we were eating at steakhouses, we were staying in nice motels, they were reserving areas for us to sit in, and I began to get the big head. We were reading papers as we went along. Carver expected to blow this
thing out and that sort of thing, and of course, we got there and lost, but it was a good experience for us. The thing that really got me was just to learn how differently the system treated these kids, and that was just representative of a lot of things. It was just amazing to me. People were coming and rolling back your bed in the morning. What is this? We were never used to this kind of treatment. There was even little chocolate things on your—what is this? I had an interest in athletics; that's when I went to Middle Tennessee. I go over, and I'd watch them practice. I just decided that the time had just come and gone for that when I decided not to do that, not to get involved in that. I guess our biggest thing is that to get to that championship, we beat Ross Grimsley in Memphis—you don't know who that is, but Ross Grimsley was a flame-throwing left hander who pitched at Bartley High School, the white school that we had to beat to get to the tournament. Ross Grimsley went on to win 130-40 games in the Major Leagues. So that particular day, we beat Ross. That's our only claim to fame. That we beat a Major Leaguer who went on to have a good career. At any rate, I decided—I was getting interested in other things, and I could see things on campus and I could—the politics of it all and the war in Vietnam and the racial things and the tensions and just the challenge of being in that environment. The first three weeks I could swear that all those white kids looked alike. They did. It didn't matter—blonde, red-head—I just had difficulty. Maybe I wasn't looking hard enough. I remember one fellow—I can't think of his name now. He was a black kid from Chicago. He said he would run back to his dorm so he could look in the mirror and make sure he was still there. He said it was so different from Chicago because you wake up in the morning and you hear birds chirping out here in Murfreesboro and grass growing, and there's not all that concrete. In Chicago where he grew up, if you saw a blade of grass, you would go and jump on it and say, “Oh, this is grass.” It's just different. The quiet, and you hear crickets at night and all those kinds of stuff and not sirens.

Toomey: Not so much anymore in Murfreesboro though.

Brooks: Yeah. I've been, but back then, it was very different. So I remember those sorts of things. I walked into—I just want to point to one incident, the first day of class—Western Civilization is the class that stands out in my mind. I walk into class. There is this buzzing of kids talking and chitter-chattering. Of course, no one is talking to me; I'm just sitting there thinking, “Why am I here? I'm uncomfortable.” The teacher walks in, and if I'm not mistaken, his name was Paul XXX. He walks in, and he—this is a bearded fellow. Not like this—he's got a pointy, devil-like beard. He's got not long hair, but it's kind of shaggy, unkempt. It's not real bad, but it's not like he's going to make the covers of magazines. He's got these cowboy boots on, and he has this strange walk, and he's dragging his feet, and he walks up to the podium. You can see he's got something rolled up in the back, in his pocket. He puts down whatever he had in his hand on the desk, and he looks out at us—doesn't smile, no expression. He's just like "Look at you, who are you people?" We are looking at him and thinking, “This guy is kind of strange.” He takes out of the back of his pocket and unrolls it, and then he gets a
piece of tape, and he slaps it on the chalkboard. It's a picture of George Wallace. He looks at it, and he spits on it! He said "Pa-to-ah" Everyone is really stunned, and he just kind of looks back at the class expressionless, and then he says, "Class is dismissed. Those who want to continue in this class, I'll see you on Wednesday." He just walked out of the class. Everybody was just kind of stunned, but in some small way, it made me feel a little bit more comfortable. I thought it was strange.

Toomey: Were you the only black student in the class?

Brooks: Yes. Well, every class I was the only black student in the class. I don't think there was ever—even through my senior year there wasn't anyone other than me in the class. That was really kind of a stunning thing.

Toomey: Did a lot of people not come back the next class?

Brooks: Most of them came back. I think it was more of a matter of just "This guy is weird, but let's just see." You could take a few more classes before you could drop him. I don't know what the drop schedule was, but I guess you could probably go two or three more days or a week, maybe. I think they were kind of fascinated by this guy. They were wandering where he was coming from. That really caught everybody off guard. I don't know how long he stayed there. He had come from Columbia, I think. He talked to me at some point about transferring to Columbia. That I should get out of there and go to Columbia. I never followed up on it. I think he left after a year or so. I don't know where he went; maybe he went back to New York, but he was—I think I got the right name. That very clearly stands out in my mind is that day that he got everybody's attention. I worked really hard that first semester, and then I began to get involved in other activities. We decided that we would start a group called CUBE. It was called Creating Understanding By Effort, and it was biracial, multiracial group of students, black and white students. It was organized to have discussion groups and to talk about issues and discuss our different backgrounds and where we were coming from and what are thoughts were about this, that, and the other and how people can look at one thing and see totally different things—what our parents taught us versus what is right or wrong—you know, lots of things to discuss. Then we got involved in campus and communities—including one of the things we decided we would do is tutor kids in the communities. We made arrangements with the black church in the community and once—at least once a week—we would go for three hours and tutor the kids in the community. It was pretty sizable groups. I imagine we are talking 30 or 40 people. It was probably 60% whites, 'cause we were a smaller number, of course. We would go once a week. Some of us probably needed tutoring ourselves and didn't have time to do this, and I think the numbers of tutors began to dwindle a little, but the program continued at least with those who could spare the time and had the ability to do it. So we made that connection with the community, and that was our first connection with the black community in Murfreesboro. I recall that they would
have this club night thing every year. So the new club would have a program, and
you would present yourself, and I don't know the purpose was to recruit members
or something, I don't know. So we decided that we would be a part of that, and so
Bobby Rucker was always good at orchestrating it. He should have done
advertising or something instead of a teacher. He's a teacher at Middle
Tennessee. He already has a great mind for that kind of stuff, and so he set up
this program and organized it, et cetera. He had this young lady named Brenda
North, who I could swear sounds just like Dionne Warwick—had a great voice.
She sang—what did you she sing? Barbara Streisand's People, "People, People,
who… that sort of thing. Reaching out—it was kind of the theme was reaching
out to you, and we need it each other, and that sort of thing. Then Bobby had us
sing the song, "Getting to know you….Getting to know all about." So, I just kind
of sundered to the back of the group and just moved my lips a little bit because I
said to myself, "These people don't want to get to know me." It's the idealism, it's
the optimism, it's the reaching out, but that was the focus of that group. They
were saying, “We're here, we're going to try to work together come meet with us
talk with us. We're going to have differences, we may even have some heated
differences, but unless we talk about them we'll never really to get to understand
them,” and that was the focus of it, and that's what we tried to do. We went out
into the community, and it was some resistance internally to that, but we went out
into the community and tried to organize young people in the community to try to
get them to feel a sense of empowerment, and I remember the one thing we did
was…well, when you do that you have to find something that will attract people
because they have an interest in it and because it will impact their lives and it
could make even some small success if you can create something or make
something happen and make people feel that they made that happen. Even though
it may not be a major thing, you planted the seed of empowerment. That they can
do these things, and you don't have to except these things and maybe next time
will try for something a little higher, raise the stakes. That's the seed we wanted
to plant, and George Wallace made that comment. In politics you've got to make
your message, he used to say, “so low to the ground that a grasshopper can pick it
up,” and that's true. We took on the issue of…

[End of Side B; End of Tape 1]
[Side A; Tape 2]

Brooks: They were unkempt. The summer or spring—I forget—the grass was three feet
high two feet high.

Toomey: Were these near campus?

Brooks: Oh, well, nothing is that far in Murfreesboro by my standards. It was relatively
close, I guess. But, anyway, I have to get the name of the park, but the idea and
the goal was to get these kids to say that this park stinks. You know, these
conditions are bad. Our parents pay taxes. This needs to be taken care of. This
grass needs to be cut. This baseball diamond needs to be in good condition. You
don't need rocks out there with kids playing. You know, the basketball goal needs to be placed up. You know, whatever, it doesn't matter what it was. The point was to get them to feel that they could make these demands and had the courage to make these simple demands. Then we got them together at the ball field. They would sit there on the bleachers—these young kids. You get some of these that were like, “What are these college kids coming and telling us what to do?” It’s kind of like the ruffian types of the community kids. You don't back down from them. This is where we are coming from. You can huff and puff at me, but I'm not going to back down. This is why we are here. If you want to be a part of this you can; if you don't, I'm not leaving. Those who want to stay can stay. I found that usually when you face up to beliefs, they will either back down, or they'll join you, if they don't hit you. I learned that also when I was in the—when I was a public defender—that when you had to go into jail tanks in the mornings and you've got 30 criminals around you, you pick out the toughest-looking guy. You go over to him, and you deal with him. Once you deal with him and gain his confidence, everybody else kind of falls in line and doesn't give any trouble. That's kind of the theory. Then after while if you do it much longer, you walk in there, and there are repeaters, and they know you. Hey, Sylvester! How you doing? Because they know you, then everyone else falls in line, and you don't have any trouble with people. Same thing there, you take on the hardest people, and everybody else sort of falls in line. So that's what we did. The demand was cut the grass—simple thing—cut the grass, put up a goal, put up a net, keep the grass, get the rocks off the baseball field. Simple concept to me, but for them, they thought that this was like a phenomenal thing. Their expectations for their city services was so low. We just go along with whatever they give us, you know, that sort of a thing. If they get around to it this month, they get around to it this month. If they don't get around to it, they don't. They don't do it all summer. The grass will grow ten feet. So what? We just hope they’ll do it XXX. And so, we've got to produce results. We keep bothering the city about it. They don't know what to do with us. After about a couple of weeks, they come out, and they start cutting the grass. They start taking care of the baseball field. Then all of a sudden, these kids feel like they've accomplished something. Then next thing they know, they're wanting to do something else. I don't know where they took it from there, we had other issues to get involved with, but it’s their issues. We helped just to get it going and to make people feel that they were empowered to, and we were taxpayers, and they deserve the same rights in their community as kids who play baseball across town. They shouldn't expect any less, and they shouldn't receive any less. So we tried to instill that. So I got invited to speak at the black churches in the community, and I would go, to some degree, chastise the black middle class for not being as assertive as I thought they should be.

Toomey: So, there's this young kid in this church, telling them that their not being assertive enough.

Brooks: Well, I wouldn't say it exactly that way. They got the drift. In the black community essentially, in particularly small towns, you're talking about some
teachers, maybe a dentist, and a doctor, and then you're talking about morticians. There's the Negro black business and whatever other type business is going on. That's pretty much where the money was, barbecue places and joints like that. Juke joints, which could be dangerous. They had them in Murfreesboro. They were not safe places to be. People had good times, but they could be a little rowdy back up in there in the woods. We went to a few of them, and they were a little rowdy. We got involved with that, I remember, one time, in one church I spoke, and they wanted to give me $15, but they really didn't intend for me to keep it, but they had fifteen dollars, and I was broke. I was like really broke; I don't have any money to eat or anything 'cause I had played cards and lost my meal ticket money unbeknownst to my parents. The only time I ever did, but anyway, I kept that fifteen dollars, and I felt so bad. Two or three of us from the campus went to whatever local place it was, and we ate dinner with that fifteen dollars, but I think they had intended me to give it back to the program. If they'd give me twenty, I'd gave five and I could have kept fifteen on that particular day. Not great money for speaking, but that's what they were giving for that particular day. We were invited, and we became members of the Rutherford County Human Relations Board, and they were trying. They asked a couple of people. They were integrating the community and the school system, and they were trying to deal with the tensions going on there, and they asked us to be involved in that process, and we did. We're still students too and trying to get through those things too. One thing, just that lack of energy, the level of services that somebody had a problem with a tooth or something and needed a dentist. They said, “Well, we know where to go. We can go to Mr.”—I forget his name now—“Mr. Jones in the Murfreesboro community.” So we go to this guy's house, and his office is his kitchen sink. That's where he was doing his work. This guy's not licensed to do anything, but he's just the dentist in the community. I looked in there and said, “I don't know if we should be here,” and so the guy did what he was supposed to do, but that's how people got by you know. It was kind of bizarre to me, but that's what happened. In terms of how other people related to us, I mean how the white kids related to me, it was kind of odd, you know. Kids would walk up to you after they kind of got to know you a little bit, and they'd want to like, “Can I feel your hair?” or “Can I touch your skin?” Then I found out there were some people who literally had never seen black people before. That some people had come from eastern Tennessee from the hills and stuff. A lot of people were just ignorant. Ignorance in the sense—I mean lack of knowledge. Ignorance not in the sense of being a demeaning term; just meaning lack of knowledge, lack of exposure. A lot of it was that, some of it was pure racism, but some of it was just lack of exposure. They would point to things like that and look at them and just say, “What's with you people?” It did make you feel like you were kind of in a twilight zone or something. It doesn't happen often, but there were people who were walking around on this earth in 1967 and ’68 who were at that level. So, how can we talk about issues that I want to talk about and deal with when somebody is asking how does your hair feel? It just really kind of blew my mind. I was there in April, obviously, of 1968, when Martin Luther King was killed. 1968 was a very difficult year. I recall that it was around six o'clock, and I was at
Smith Hall down the hall from my room. I was in this white kid's room. I was laying across his bed. He was playing his music, his Wilson Pickett, Mustang Sally—you know everybody was singing like that Mustang Sally. The music is going on, and he leaves the room, and I'm just listening to the music. He comes back, and he's got this southern drawl accent, and he says, "Sylvester, Martin Luther King’s been shot, and I think he's dead." It was just like something just went right through me. “No, this can't be true,” but the expression on his face was such that—first of all this is not something you should joke about or even play around with, but just to look at the expression in his face—it was pretty obvious to me that he was serious. My first reaction was, “No, this is not true.” My second reaction was “Yeah,” at his expression, “it probably is true.” My third reaction was I was upset that he was the one who told me. Even though I'd only known him for awhile, but it was racial then. I was upset that it was Martin, and the person who told me was white. I overcame that within probably ten minutes—or maybe two or three minutes—but at that instance it angered me, not angered me, but I just felt I was mad at that point. Even though he was saying it such a tone that this is a bad thing, you know—you could get that from his voice. I was upset. I was feeling a lot of things, and that was one of the things I was feeling.

Toomey: That's interesting.

Brooks: Within a minute, it was over. I think we may have even hugged each other, and it was clear that we both felt very sad about it at the time. I think that he generally felt sad. My initial feelings subsided pretty quickly. Then we went over to the student center and because that's where the big television was. So something had happened in the Middle East, and this Arab guy had the news on. So the kids were there, and they were trying to find out about this King thing, and this Arab walked right past us and switched the news station. Now you know, he was going to be in a big whirl of trouble. He just walked right up and turned the station to another station because he thought he was going to find something about the Arab situation. He was removed physically from the television room, but you had to have a lot of nerve to do that, number one.

Toomey: Do you think he knew what he was doing?

Brooks: Yeah, he knew what he was doing. He just walked up and changed the station because he was more concerned with his issue, but we were sitting up watching the program intently. He just did that, but we knew he was just very emotional. He was very highly strung person. I remember that happening. He was just physically removed from the room at that time because people were not really interested in playing around at that point. Things were real tense. Most of my teachers cancelled the classes the next day, except for one, my geology professor. I was going to go back home, but I stayed overnight. That was April 4th when this occurred, and I stayed till April 5th just to go to his class at ten o'clock that morning because I wanted to confront him as to why he didn't cancel his class.
Why didn't you do this? I got there, and before anything could happen, he started talking. He said—and its with this deep southern drawl—"I only have this class today because I want to tell you how badly I feel personally about what has occurred, and people don’t realize what this man has meant to this country, not only black people, but particularly white people have lost their best friend.” He went on for a few minutes in that vein and totally caught me off guard because I came there prepared to raise some hell. He caught me off guard, and it was part of a learning experience for me about pre-judging people that I had to deal with also. We all have to deal with. He had a personal message to give, and he wanted to give it to these kids. He felt he had to do that. He did it in five, ten minutes—short period of time—and then he said class dismissed. “I will see you in the next few days, when everything is reasonably okay for us to continue doing this.” So I remember he kind of threw me because I was prepared for something else, and he came from a totally different place from where I thought he would be coming from. So I got on a bus. I got a ride to Nashville, and then caught a bus to Memphis. No, no the reverse. I got a bus to Nashville, and then got a ride to Memphis. As we approached Memphis, we didn't know it was a curfew. They had the National Guard out there at that point in time, so you really had to have a pass to go from one point to another. So, we're driving along, and all the sudden this military jeep comes up, and this guy with this machine gun mounted on the jeep turns right at us and says “halt” in a very forceful tone of voice. “Halt!!” That kind of thing. “Where are you going?” I said, “We're just I'm going home, and that's as far as I intend to go tonight.” He gave me a pass. It said I would have from A point, and I told them where I was going, and he gave me an estimated amount of time to get there. Twenty-five minutes to get there because they didn't want people out on the streets. Things were getting out of control. There were riots all over the country, cities were burning, rebellion everywhere, in Memphis too. Things were very tense. These guys were trying to maintain a degree of order. So I went home. I got my little pass, and this person dropped me off, and he went on home and tried to make it within his scheduled time because somebody would stop you. You just couldn't drive around the city, you know. The next day they had this memorial march at the Mason Temple. The Mason Temple was the church where Martin Luther gave that speech the night before, you know, "I've been to the mountain top, I've looked over, I've seen the promised land," kind of prophetic, "I may not get there with you" etc. It was just a huge number of people. I jumped, and as far as I could see ahead of me was nothing but people, and as far as I could see behind me there was nothing but people. It was just a tremendous amount of people on Main Street in Memphis, the main drag there downtown. In an American city, at every intersection, or at most intersections, they had troops, they had tanks. This is in the city, huge tanks….military tanks. On top of the buildings, you could see these men these policemen and soldiers with rifles looking down at this crowd. You always kind of wondered if this thing gets out of control and turns into a riot, what's going to happen. Are we going to become like a shooting alley for these people? What's going to happen here? Everything went calmly. The people who were involved in, perhaps involved in, the reason why Martin had to come back the second time
to Memphis, guaranteed that nothing was going to happen. The police didn't have to be there, but they were there. They guaranteed it wasn't going to happen. It was a group called the Invaders. The Invaders was a local group, black militant group in the vein of the Black Panthers. Started out with a group of young kids—those are the reasons why my parents wanted me to get out of Memphis. Because I knew a lot of these people. I grew up with them. They were at my high school, many of them. Koby Smith, Charles Cabot, Charles Balot, an example. Koby Smith—this kid was brilliant, you know, merit scholar. He had gotten a scholarship at MIT, and he left MIT to come back to Memphis to be involved in this thing. He was very serious about this stuff. The movement began to get infiltrated by real criminals. It got infiltrated by the FBI to break it up. He got framed, and a lot of those kids ended up in prison, and some of the true criminals who were just simply used as an excuse to riot and etc. and to take whatever out of the window. You lost control of it, but you got the sense that somebody had infiltrated this organization and brought these kind of entities into this organization. How do you know who they are, and I think there are people who are real serious about what they were about lost control of it. But anyway, that's why King came to Memphis, to have this march for the garbage workers. They were trying to unionize, and he led this march, and he lost control of it. He lost control of it because the invaders made him loose control of it. They turned that march into a riot. I don't think it was those that true core leadership. I think it was part of that criminal element and the FBI infiltration group that disrupted that march. King had to come back because he had to determine—he had to show that he had control of that movement. That he was planning the Poor People's March in Washington and if he couldn't control a march in Memphis—this is 1968, and "Black Power" was still big, Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, the Panthers were beginning, and many voices were being heard other than Martin Luther King. Many thought he had lost control—if in fact, he had really had control, but they thought that his voice was beginning to wane and others were beginning to rise. He felt that he had to demonstrate in Memphis that he could control that situation. In fact, what happened was they had negotiated a deal with the invaders, and the invaders pretty much guaranteed that the second time around that it would be a peaceful march. They probably got some money for some programs—they probably guaranteed some money to some local programs, whatever their interests were, but they worked it out. It was going to be a peaceful march. It was going to work that way, but then, of course, he got assassinated. At any rate, we returned to Memphis for that. It was just amazing to see that sort of a thing in an American city. You see it in the rest of the world, when you see people facing canons and machine guns, but you don't really think of it in an American city. It was a strange sort of a feeling to see military control of a civilian area. So anyway, that's what that was about, the King assassination, and I was in Middle Tennessee at the time. I think it pretty much shocked the campus and shocked the people there. The Vietnam War was also going on at the time. Did you want me to touch base on that?
Toomey: We've heard from other people that the Vietnam War was such a big issue that integration was almost secondary. I'm just wandering what you think about that comment.

Brooks: I, for whatever reasons, had gained or obtained the ability to kind of move among groups. I could move in the city among the kids of Murfreesboro. I could move in the black community in school. I could move among the white kids in the anti-war stuff, the hippy type. Some of it was just because they wanted to be with a black guy, you know, and I knew that. I was just XXX type, and some of them were really great kids, and they were trying to learn me, and I was trying to learn them, and they were genuine, but some were just trying to just hang around just to be hanging around. I could sort of get a feel for what was going on with that. There were groups on campus that were anti-war, and I can remember a lot of booths and things out there, passing out pamphlets, but I don't think, in my memory of it, I don't think it was as an aggressive operation as what was going on at other campuses. You take like Kent State—I mean, it was nothing like that. There were those with the long hair and the peace symbols, and there were drugs. There were a lot more drugs on campus than people thought. And again I smelled, I didn't inhale. But it was there, in no small way, and whether or not the police or the authorities just simply wanted to ignore it. I didn't know about it. Kids were paranoid about the existence of narcotics. Who was a narc? All of a sudden, some long-haired guy would show up out of nowhere, and they'd wonder, “who is he?” But it did stop them from having these crazy parties, you know, where people would get totally whacked out. I'd just kind of go and watch. I really didn't participate in that sort of thing, but just to watch it, it was really, it was going on in a really big way. I was draft age, and obviously, it was personal to me too. It was an incentive to study because literally you'd see somebody in December when you leave, and they wouldn't be there in January. They're gone. They're grades went, they lost their deferment, and you're going to the war. I had friends—I was in Washington this summer twice to take my daughter and pick her up. And I always visit the Vietnam Memorial because I have friends whose names are there, and it was like that. A kid could be in school and six to seven weeks, a few months later, he could be in some jungle in Vietnam. This was real. Here I am, I in a coast-central school at a pace of three years. What for? I'm going to lose my deferment after my undergraduate career. I should hang around here for as long as I can. Unless I really wanted to go to Vietnam, and the strange thing about that was that I was in ROTC and I had been in ROTC in high school too because military training at that time was mandatory—ROTC was mandatory at the high school level and at the college level. So we had to take two years—in high school I took three years—of military stuff. It was two mandatory, and I volunteered for the third as I just said, and it was mandatory that you take two years at Middle Tennessee at that time of ROTC. So altogether, I had had five years of ROTC training. Although in high school, of course, it was segregated; it was called NDCC for the black school. It was National Defense Cadet Corps, same thing. In the white school, it was the Reserve Officer Training Core until my senior year, and then it became ROTC. Everything changed in '67 in
Memphis. You know, it was NDCC then ROTC. I was on the drill team in high school, and when I went to Middle Tennessee, I also joined the drill team. I liked to parade and twirl the rifles and throwing them around with the bayonet. It was dangerous, but we knew what we were doing. You know, you throw the bayonet would turn the rifle with the bayonet on it, the guy in the front would, and the guy in the back would catch it. Then everybody would twirl—it was fun. They went to Mardi Gras too.

[End of side A; Tape 2]
[Side B; Tape 2]
Brooks: We would go around singing things like [singing] “Birdie, birdie in the sky, why you do that in my eye? Ain't gonna hollar, ain't gonna cry, I'm just glad that cows don't fly. Am I right or wrong, da, da, Am I right or wrong?” You know, it’s just cadence left, right, left. And then I get to Middle Tennessee, you know, and they're singing stuff like [singing] “I'm gonna go to Vietnam, kill myself some Viet Cong, Am I right or wrong?” And I said, “Wait a minute, this is not my mentality, I'm in it for the parade, you know. I'm in it for the trip to Mardi Gras.” These people are talking about something totally different than I'm thinking about here, you know. Just to touch on that quickly, it was mandatory you had to do it; I wasn't that enthused about it. You would have these drills—mandatory mass drills. You would have to have your little buttons shined, and XXX they would call them XXX. I was never too big into that. I would get these demerits—they give you demerits, and if you did something wrong they would give you demerits. I had piled up all of these demerits, 40 or 50 of them or something. I had passed all of the courses, the course work and all of the map reading and the marksmanship, all of this stuff that you are supposed to do. Except I had these demerits, and I had forgotten about them, so I get down to the point where I'm ready to graduate, and you go in to check if you've got all of your credits and everything, and then somebody says you have an incomplete in ROTC, you know, one half credit incomplete in ROTC. So I go over there, and this guy says, "You've got these demerits, and we can't give you this half credit unless you do something with these demerits." And I'm ready to graduate. And he says, “I'll tell you if you sign up for the military—you go in as a second lieutenant—then we'll just forget about this and let you graduate.” They're trying to hold me up from graduating for these demerits. Trying to blackmail me to go to Vietnam. Well, I'll just sit here. The first thing they would look for is second Lieutenants—the first one they would shoot is the guy with the radio, the medical guy, and these little lieutenants because then everything breaks down. And I said, “You must be crazy.” So they work on me a little bit from that approach, nothings going to happen there, and then it became apparent to them at some point that I'm just not going to do that. So they give me all of these rifles, and I spent the whole weekend cleaning the rifles. Breaking them down in the armory. I had to clean them and break them all down and oil them and whatever. So I must have spent, I don't know, several, lots of them. They just gave me something to do to work off these demerits, and so I did that. I just thought it was kind of funny that they tried to use that as a way to get me to sign up to join the Senior Program, and if you do
that you are going to become a Second Lieutenant, and you are going to go to Vietnam. I just thought that was really kind of strange that they would do that. But in terms of Vietnam, what say kept me out of the war was because once you reached the point where I was at—I was graduating, it was my third year—I probably could have hung around for the forth year, but I didn't want to do that. There was no reason to do that. I had the credits. I was ready to go. I wanted to go to law school, but there's no law school deferment. You can't say I'm going to law school there because they only had an undergraduate school. So the lottery came along, and they determined that was a fairer way to determine who would go to the military because many people had been complaining that too many people from lower economic backgrounds and racial backgrounds were ending up in Vietnam. That if you had enough money to get your kid into college then your kid didn't have to face gunfire in Vietnam. So they used this lottery system. So the day came when they were going to announce the lottery, and the males were obviously very tense, and I guess their girlfriends too. They were going to announce it at this radio station, as I recall. That the information would come to this radio station and then they would post it outside the building on a wall outside the radio station. Seems like every male at Middle Tennessee was outside that radio station. It was a big crowd. What you would do is you would yell your birthday up. You would say April 3. In my case, it was July the 14th. Then somebody would yell back a number, who was at the front. So I yelled up July 14th, and somebody said 331, and there would be applause because 331 meant you were way down the list because they would have to go from 1,2,3 all the way down, and they never got past really 130 or 140 in the draft in terms of the lottery, in terms of who went. And then my roommate yelled out his number. He said April something, and they said number 4. And everybody said “boo.” The crowd said “ooo!” You could here this “ooo!” through the crowd. But Michael never ended up going to Vietnam. He contested it, and he ended up filing for C.O., conscientious objector, and I don't think he ever ended up going. He had to go take his physical. They tell you stuff—and right or wrong, we would do it—and the thing was that we would try to get his blood pressure up so we gave him sugar cubes like every hour. We give him like all of these sugar cubes and aspirins. We almost killed him just to get his blood pressure up sky high so that when they took his blood pressure the next morning at this place that he would fail the test. And they would tell you that they detained you and said they would check it two or three hours. Then you go to the bathroom and eat soap, and soap would do something to you—and don't know if this is right, but he told you all of this stuff. So they were this, you were talking about how active it was—there was this group that would advise you as to things to do, and even to the point of going in there with pink underwear and stuff like that. Some guys would do that. That didn't work, but some of them didn't want to do that. But with Michael, we did do the sugar cubes, and we did do the aspirin, and we would have to wake him up, “Alright, stay awake; you have to stay awake,” every hour on the hour and make sure he took his sugar cubes and aspirins, but he passed. He passed the exam. So none of that worked. So he had to file the conscientious objector stuff, and ultimately, he did not go. Just quickly I will mentioned that we
formed a black student union, and its initials were B.S.U. We were invited by the Baptist Student Union to cake and punch at their house and knew something was up but didn't know exactly what was up. As it turned out, what they wanted us to do was to change our name from B.S.U. to B.S.A. and that's what we agreed to do. I wanted to touch briefly on the other things that were going on the campus, and at the time... In 1968 Martin had died, had been assassinated, and there was also a presidential election going on. We were moving in the direction certainly of Bobby Kennedy, especially after he made what he called a reassessment of his position on the war in Vietnam, and we formed a group called the Students for Kennedy—essentially took over the Young Democrats. So they had the election. They didn't have any specific rules about how that was to occur. A group of us went in there and simply voted ourselves in. We became president and vice-president and so and so, and student representative to the A.S.B. That's how we got out position there. Bobby Kennedy came to Vanderbilt, and we had an opportunity to meet him at Vanderbilt. He spoke there. At that time I was writing for the Sidelines, and I wrote a piece about his presentation there. People said it was less of an editorial. They talked about journalism and made arguments about it wasn't journalism. That Sidelines wasn't a good journalism organization because I was given more opinion than reporting. Bobby got assassinated. We were sitting and watching television that early June afternoon, and it was a terrible, terrible thing. So we formed the Students for McCarthy organization, and I was chosen Speaker's Bureau, and I did some traveling, speaking. I would get the crowd going and then introduce who the primary speaker was. At that time I think Al Gore Jr. was the state chair for that group. I don't think I ever got to meet him, but he was the chair. Then after the convention, McCarthy lost, of course, and Hubert Humphrey, who was Vice-President, won the Democratic Nomination. He slowly began to separate himself from Lyndon Johnson's war position, and as he began to do that we swallowed deep and supported him because at that point we just wanted to stop George Wallace. Kids maybe got involved with the same furor they had for the Kennedy campaign and the McCarthy campaign—maybe we would have had a different outcome across the country. In Tennessee, I think our objective was no Wallace at any cost, even if Nixon won the state, no Wallace. Nixon did carry in the state of Tennessee, but looking back, perhaps if Wallace had taken more states the nation would have been spared of Nixon, whatever that meant. We involved ourselves in candlelight visuals for J.F.K., and Julian Bond came a couple of times, and we were able to introduce him, and that was an interesting encounter. Because we were involved in the Democrat Party as a young Democratic Party leader, all of a sudden that meant that we had to be invited to the local Rutherford County Democratic thing, and me walking into a room of the old good old boys in Murfreesboro, Rutherford County. It was rather odd for them and for me because for a black person to walk in there, and all of a sudden, that was very new to them, and they were kind of shocked, and I was kind of put back by it too. It was a very different experience. I am going to just touch briefly, and we can talk later perhaps. The first time I went to a football game at Middle Tennessee, I had been told about it, but I was shocked when I actually saw it. There was the guy on this horse—I think it was
either a gray horse or a white horse—and he could rear up on it, and he was in this full dress formal Confederate uniform, gray and yellow. When they scored a touchdown, they wanted to get something going this guy would get up on the horse, and I think he would gallop down the sidelines sometimes. They had this cannon, and if a touchdown was scored or they wanted to get the fans all revved up, and Dixie would start going and all these flags would be waving around, and I was just taken aback by this because everything in my experience relative to that flag, and even today, I associated with racism, with deprivation, with the people I saw carrying it had no love of me. They weren't carrying it because when I saw it in Mississippi, they weren't carrying it as we went by talking about their heritage. They were making a point to me, and where they thought my position in this world was. I don't think I ever went to another football game. I only went to one, maybe two, but that was it for me. When they had parades down the square, this guy leads it. He was just a fixture, and worse than that, he was supposed to be representative of a historical person, of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Nathan Bedford Forrest, from a historical standpoint, if you were a history student—I had a double major in history and political science. But here was a guy who was a Confederate General, who was the founder of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, who had lead the massacre in Fort Pillow, Tennessee. Which was essentially, if you know anything about that, was a fort that was primarily held by a small contingent of black Union soldiers, some whites, but there was a lot of black soldiers there. That was really an insult to have black soldiers in blue uniforms and on Southern land. He essentially massacred those soldiers and the children and the women that were there, and to have this man as symbolic of the mascot of this school, particularly a public school, was repugnant, and just unacceptable. When they built the student union, which is probably still there, they had this big emblem of this guy.

Toomey: It came down just before President Walker took office.

Brooks: It came down at some point.

Toomey: '89 or '90.

Brooks: It stayed up a long time. But they put that thing up there, and we used to throw rocks at it. I think the manager or the supervisor of the building's office was right behind where the sign was, and it would sound, clank, every time someone would hit it. I know it just created a lot of havoc in his office, but that was just a slap in the face because we knew what that meant and what this guy stood for, and there is some other history involved too. I know that he got out of it at some point and the rest of it and supposedly it started for different reasons than it ended up, but the people who followed him had their own vision of what that meant. They respected what it was started for, and that’s what I saw. The only other game I went to was what they used to call a Grantland Rice Bowl there. It was a national bowl, televised bowl at Murfreesboro. One of those lower bowls, but it was a nationally televised bowl. I forget who Grantland Rice was, but smaller teams
would come, teams of less ranking would come. This particular year it was some school from Louisiana—Louisiana Tech maybe it was—versus Navy, and it was cold; for Tennesseans, it was cold. So we have this national audience, and there are no people in the stands, and so there coming over to the dorms trying to get kids to come to the stands because they want to show some people, and so we go over there and come to find out it was a great game. We stayed for just a little while; it was too cold for me. I went back. It turned out that the quarterbacks for those two teams for Navy—it was Roger Steibeck and the Louisiana team it was Terry Bradshaw—and they were really airing it out. We didn't know we were looking at two Hall of Famers, and of course, Terry would lead the Pittsburgh Steelers to Super Bowl after Super Bowl, and Roger Steinbeck would do the same thing, and those guys played on that campus at our field on that particular day. That was a pretty amazing thing ‘cause no flags, no Confederacy about that. It was a nationally televised game. That was a very interesting thing. Having going through the experience of seeing all these flags was totally different to what I had been exposed to in Memphis. Things were segregated in Memphis, but we had a majority population. How do you really segregate a majority population? There were white water fountains, colored water fountains, but nobody really honored it. It was somewhat different. I'm not saying that things were great, but I'm saying it's a big difference when you have a very large population of black folks and a very small non-urban type population like it was in Murfreesboro. So we decided that enough was enough and that we had to bring this issue forward to the student body. I wrote a piece not really intending to cause—if it did it, that was fine—stir a fight, but it was really just to express my concerns and my feelings about it. This is what I think. This is what I feel. You can like it, or you cannot like it. If you want to respond to it, that's great. You want to fight about it, we can fight about it. Then we'll try some other way to get under your skin. So it turned out to be quite a brouhaha. I think we raised some issues for people to discuss for quite a while. I received personal threats during that period of time. Some of them were death threats. People would call on the phone and hang up. Say things then hang up, racial things in an attempt to intimidate. I received notes taped to my door and that sort of thing. I remember one thing from some group called the Project Manhattan they called themselves in my mail box down at the Student Union, and it said, “if you do so and so, we’re going to turn you into the F.B.I. and to the police, and we’re watching you at all times, and we have our own means of taking care of people like you, and we will do so; better watch your step,” that kind of thing. I don't recall anyone confronting me face to face. I don't think I was ever threatened face to face. I don't know I was ever in a situation to be threatened face to face. I didn't take the walk across campus at night by myself a lot. I wasn't stupid. I don't think I was ever confronted face to face. It was the telephone calls. It was the letters. It was the other kinds of things, but on the other hand, there were positive responses too from people. I mentioned Dr. Huhta and Dr. Jim Leonard. You may not know Jim Leonard. He was in the History Department. He wrote something—you may not have it. Jim Leonard was killed in car accident about two weeks into that process. He was twenty-nine years old, going to Vanderbilt to do some research, and hit a car embankment. Two weeks
earlier he had written an article in the *Sidelines*. So some of the professors even stepped forward and were involved in the issue. So it wasn't all negative, and I have a letter I want to share with you. I received after King was killed and the minister that was over the Wesley, the Methodist group. That was a pretty good enlightening letter, and I want to share that with you. To my amazement I spoke that night at the A.S.B. meeting, and I guess we got the emotions going and other speakers, and that one night that group of students decided to vote down the Nathan Bedford Forrest and the gray rider, the Confederate rider. Never in my vaguest imagination did I think that would happen. I didn't think that was going to happen at all. I thought we were just going to da, da, da, da, da, and they would say no, no, no, no, no. It would just be a debate. I never thought that those kids would do that. They said, “Yeah, we're going to keep Dixie—it's a nice little beat.” But there are a lot of songs with a nice little beat to it, but you don't have to use that. We'll just put it in the background, but the understanding it was going to be phased out. That was the undercurrent. The conversation on the side. That night they voted to get rid of the Confederate rider, and they voted to get rid of the Nathan Bedford Forrest. I thought for a group of Southern kids to disavow themselves to separate themselves from Forrest shocked me, quite frankly.

Toomey: How quickly was that after your letter?

Brooks: Well, that was a good while. The voting came at the very end of the thing. Probably in December. This process went on for almost two months. The last two weeks was the voting. But on that night we got 'em. Partially got 'em, to my shock. They regrouped and came up with some Robert's Rules, and they got a revote the next week. The next week, they reversed what ever they had done the week before. Just the idea they even moved the direction they moved the direction they moved the first time really shocked me. Caught me off guard. But then, of course, I guess they regrouped, and they reinstated pretty much everything that they wanted to reinstate. But I think the writing was on the wall; it was just going to be a matter of time. Dr. Scarlett was there, and I really thought that he wanted to do something with this. But it would be a gradual process; I didn’t know it would take 'til 1989 to get that thing off the ground.

Toomey: Well, there is still a Forest Hall on campus, so…

Brooks: Yeah, in the military building; that was Forest Hall.

Toomey: That’s probably the only remaining vestige, I think.

Brooks: And you know, I think a lot of the stuff—it's history. I mean these things are factual, but they belong in a history book, and they belong in a museum. They don't belong on public—especially buildings. They don't belong in places like that. Put them in places where they ought to be at. It was a challenging time for black athletes. We had black athletes, not so much the football team, but the basketball team. I don't know what was going on with the recruitment of black
athletes on the football team, but it was a very kind of unique thing when a
black—we had like four black starters on the team, then and a guy would go a
score to points, dunk the ball or whatever, and the crowd would go, “yeah.” Then
this guy in a gray uniform would run up to him and pat him on the back. At some
point, one time he did it, and the guy he turned around—you know, the athlete—
and I don't know if cold clocked him or he just gave him a look that just, I don't
know what happened but that ended, but it was bizarre. It's like you supposed to
be at this university and that was the thing you were supposed to accept
everything as if this is the way it is, and we're not going to change, and you
suppose to just follow lock step with what is going on. But just to see these guys
on the scholarship, and so they don't like this stuff, but what are they going to do?
On that particular day, I recall that he approached that player, and it was a very
tense moment. If he didn't hit him, he pushed him. Something happened right
under the basket right there. Nobody ever approached him again. I think they
discontinued having them in the gym after that, but that had to be really touchy.

Toomey: Well, we're going to be about out of time here, so I don't want to catch you in the
middle of something, so I guess we'll just stop it there.

Brooks: You know, we later—we put on plays at the time. I remember the one we did was
*The Devil and Bessie Smith*. All of this is going on the same year, basically the
same time frame. Of course, Bessie Smith was black singer, jazz singer, during
the Depression, was making all of these stops, and she was killed. She was hurt
very seriously in a car accident in Memphis, and she was at a hospital and
bleeding to death, and they would not admit her to treat her because she was
black, and she bled to death at that hospital. The play was about that, and I was
an orderly, and so they're telling me not to go out and help Bessie and stuff, and I
go out and I come back in, and I have all of this blood on me. We put on a play
about that. There were lots of things we were trying to do to try to educate people
to expose people to different things that were going on in the community, and
there were a lot of professors—that was the thing I wanted to touch on briefly and
name a few of them that really meant something. Dr. Vandervorg in the political
science department was an advisor to me and somebody I could always go to and
talk to. Dr. Perez, who is still there now, was another person I thought. Dr.
Huhta in the history department, Dr. Leonard—the gentleman I mentioned who
was killed in a car accident—June Martin who is still teaching in the French
department there, at that time was married to Marvin Martin and then later she
married Dr. McCash, Burt McCash, in the history department, and Burt stepped
up.

[End of Tape]