



Interview

with

ANN ATWATER

November 8, 1995

by Chris Gioia

Indexed by Chris Gioia

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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TAPE INDEX

Interviewee: Ann Atwater
Interviewer: Chris Gioia
Interview Date: 11/8/95
Location: Durham, NC

Topic: An oral history of Ann Atwater, a former community organizer. In 1964, she volunteered with Operation Breakthrough and helped organize neighborhood councils. She later became a supervisor on the board of directors. She was also very active in United Organizations for Community Improvement, another NC Fund agency.

Subject Headings: NC Fund; Durham; Community Action; War on Poverty; Civil Rights; Howard Fuller.

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; the rest is paraphrased.

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index Topic

[Tape 1 of 2; Side A]

- 003 Opening announcement
- 005 Born in Columbus County. Parents were sharecroppers. Youngest of 9.
- 14 Moved to Durham in '53 after she got married at age 14. Husband left her as soon as she arrived. She had a daughter and was pregnant. Became a domestic
- 23 How she and her children survived. Rec'd a check of \$57/month from social services. Her faith in God sustained her.
- 56 Describes her house, which leaned over the street, had holes, bathroom door didn't stay shut, etc.
- 78 Howard Fuller came to her door one day and invited her to neighborhood meeting.
- 83 More about her house. She went to meeting. OBT workers negotiated with her landlord so repairs would be made. They paid her back rent.
- 106 The house should have been torn down, but if she'd insisted on the repairs, she wouldn't have been able to pay the rent. Now she knows how to deal with landlords, though.
- 125 Became a Community Action Technician. Story of how she organized a picket when she wasn't supposed to, because her supervisor said to do it, and Howard Fuller's reaction.
- 150 Joined UOCI, registered people to vote. Became member of board of directors
- 175 Started at OBT working with Head Start. Served on board: 6 years representing the poor, 2 representing the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People
- 186 [Phone call (to 202)]
- 205 George Esser offered her a college education, but she said no. "My people need me."
- 222 Tried to help the kids in Head Start. When their parents trusted her, she helped them too.
- 235 Part of her job was learning to deal with people, not make fun of them, sit on a couch that the baby urinated on every day. She tried to teach people to be independent.
- 269 Some of her clients couldn't be helped.
- 281 "I got a lot of awards and certificates, but I didn't get any money. I still had to scrounge to make ends meet." Financial troubles.
- 320 Went to work for the DHA. Told them God had said they needed to hire her. Worked many more hours than she was paid for. Explained the rules to tenants who were unintentionally violating them and risking eviction.

* closed until Jan 2000

- 370 She was strict with the tenants. She got them to go to tenant meetings by threatening eviction.
- 400 Tried to help kids: "If you can get the little children on your side, they'll get to their parents."
- 402 Currently chairman of her community. Discussion of her health problems.
- 435 [Why was she so successful?] "Because I won't take no for an answer, that's why."
- 442 Her work with Klan leader C.P. Ellis, and resulting trouble. How she won him over so he decided black people were OK.
- 517 Makes helping people her business whether they like it or not. Encourages people to speak up for themselves.
- 536 Never lends money, always gives it. Raised at least \$500 a month for her tenants at the DHA.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

- 15 Beginning
- 19 Story about man throwing away mattresses. She asked if she could keep them. Last week.
- 41 People call her at all hours of the night, asking for help. She always tries to help, at any hour.
- 53 Brought a turkey dinner to a family last year
- 82 [Phone call; tape paused.]
- 88 Has learned where to go when she wants something done. Always start with someone in authority.
- 100 Spoke at a dinner at NCCU. She criticized the housing authority and got in trouble for it. Her office was moved. She was given a broken chair, which was how she broke her tailbone and fractured her spine. Financial problems relating to her trying collect disability.
- 200 During a march to protest housing problems, she told someone to pick up a VW that was blocking their way. Led to tear gassing and other reprisals.
- 243 The time she put a knife to C.P. Ellis's throat and Councilman John Stewart told her not to.
- 256 Once, the City Council wasn't listening, so she hit one of them with her umbrella
- 264 Story about when they went to a housing official's office and she pulled the phone out of the wall, smacked him and kept him there all night with grievances.
- 276 They always brought a crowd to meetings, which some people didn't like. Their tactics were "most effective," because now every time she goes to the store, the people there are scared of her.
- 304 Calls the water and power companies to intervene when they cut people off.
- 345 Always talks loudly, which scares people
- 352 Stole Dept. of Soc. Services manual, copied it and brought it back.
- 383 Steps in protest: Talking, then stronger actions like picketing.

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

- 001 She doesn't believe in boycotts because the one UOCI held was ignored by many blacks.
- 023 John Wheeler used to speak for black people, but they decided they could speak for themselves. He used to say which streets needed paving. But they demanded that all the streets be paved.
- 037 Book and movie will come out about her and C.P. Ellis. Has been on Good Morning America, other shows, and to events all over the country. Used to help other neighborhoods organize.
- 060 Middle-class black women participated in politics after her example. She was the first woman to be vice-chair of the Democratic Party in Durham.
- 100 She was successful because she was always "ready to fight." Plus she was loud and persistent. She wouldn't take no for an answer.
- 117 Some of the places she's worked, she was the only one who wasn't scared to go inside.
- 124 The projects are worse now because of drugs.
- 128 Used to get up early every morning and drive through the Fayetteville Street projects "to make sure everybody was doing what they were supposed to do." Finally stopped because it was too dangerous.
- 153 Kids sell drugs and their parents don't stop them.
- 172 They marched frequently. They were always well-organized and they notified the city first. Usually the mayor called out the National Guard.
- 210 Always had a meeting after the events to determine how successful they were
- 228 Howard Fuller's work to organize people. People were scared of him. NCCU wouldn't hire him when he left the Fund.

- 276 [pause in tape]
Went to Charlotte to help organize a neighborhood. Her clothes were stolen. They locked up the director of the housing authority in one of his own projects and wouldn't let him out until he promised some changes in writing. "Sometimes you have to fuss to get what you want."
- 314 Has lost her "bark" because of family and health problems. Daughter gave up a job at Duke to go on drugs. She's "heartbroken."
- 325 End of interview.