

Interview

with

ANN ATWATER

December 7, 1995

by Jennifer Fiumara and Mary Cleary

Indexed by Jennifer Fiumara and Mary Cleary

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

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0-3

TAPE INDEX

Interviewee: Ann Atwater, Community Organizer, Durham, NC

Interviewers: Mary Cleary and Jennifer Fiumara

Interview Date: December 7, 1995

Location: Durham, NC

Tape: Cassette 1 of 1 (approximate total length: 90 minutes)

Topic: Ann Atwater's involvement with Operation Breakthrough, Inc., the North Carolina Fund, and the United Organizations for Community Improvement during the 1960s and how her experiences have affected her life today. Ms. Atwater is a 60 year-old African-American woman who was one of the major forces behind much of the social unrest that occurred in Durham during the 1960s. She was recruited by Howard Fuller, a community organizer employed by Operation Breakthrough, to help fight the poverty and inequality apparent in Ms. Atwater's community. Ms. Atwater not only ensured that the city council was aware of the concerns of the black community, but was also instrumental in "blowing the whistle" on many local government agencies engaging in discriminatory practices. Today Ms. Atwater is still involved in her community and continues to fight injustices in the system. She has received over 200 awards for her efforts to improve the quality of life in Durham. Although Ms. Atwater's "professional" life is filled with numerous accolades and accomplishments, she remains poor and has experienced numerous personal tragedies.

During the interview, Ms. Atwater discusses her involvement with community organizing and the impact her experiences have had on Durham and on her personal life. She also discusses many prominent figures in Durham in the 1960s, the source of today's social problems; and her own trials and tribulations with her children, ex-husband, and grandchildren. Furthermore, Ms. Atwater touched on the city council's reaction to the poor when they became politically active, and her work with the Durham Housing Authority.

Subjects: Operation Breakthrough; Civil Rights Movement; United Organizations for Community Improvement; North Carolina Fund; Durham Riots; Poverty and Inequality in Durham; Community Action Agencies; Howard Fuller; Durham Housing Authority; Durham City Council.

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index Topic

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A]

001	[Opening announcement.]
012	Early family life and Atwater's move to Durham.

- 092 Atwater's involvement with Operation Breakthrough (OBT) began when Howard Fuller approached her about trying to improve the poor conditions in her own home and in her neighborhood.
- 158 Discussion of how the condition of Atwater's neighborhood affected her.
- 171 Atwater's first mass meeting about OBT.
- 180 The process Atwater had to go through to have her house repaired.
- 217 How Atwater learned to "get help" and discussion of her community organizing activities.
- 249 Discussion of Atwater's job as a community organizer with the United Organizations for Community Improvement.
- 263 Atwater trained under Howard Fuller to become a Community Action Technician in 1967.
- 272 Description of the differential treatment of blacks at the Durham Department of Social Services and Atwater's efforts to fight the system and to inform African-Americans about their rights under the department.
- 308 Description of Atwater's duties with UOCI and how she found out information from government agencies so that she could inform the community.
- 328 Discussion of how her work has impacted Durham. Although she sometimes has doubts about whether her efforts have made a long-term impact on Durham, she knows in her heart that she has positively influenced the lives of many people.
- 373 George Esser, Executive Director of the North Carolina Fund, offers to send Ms. Atwater to school. She describes her experiences at NC Central University, and why she eventually had to drop out.
- 398 Discussion of Atwater's job at the Durham Housing Authority as a liaison between the residents and the agency beginning in 1981.
- 442 Atwater injured on the job, causing her to go on disability. Unknowingly, signed away her insurance benefits and her rights to sue the agency for negligence when she settled for only \$5,200.
- 491 Today, Atwater is still involved with her community.
- 495 Atwater's troubled grandchildren live with her ever since their mother (Atwater's daughter) entered a drug treatment program four years ago. Discussion of Atwater's attempts to become a foster parent.
- 514 Discussion of Atwater's daughter's involvement with drugs and the source of Atwater's grandchildren's emotional problems.
- 542 Atwater believes that the lack of prayer in school, and the lack of discipline in the home are partly to blame for the social problems she sees today.

560 Atwater's youngest daughter is a minister in St. Louis, but her eldest daughter just
dropped out of a drug treatment program after being dry for three years.
582 Atwater's relationship with Howard Fuller.

599 Ann organizes a picket line as one of her first attempts at community organizing. She
learns to go with her gut instinct instead of what others tell her to do.

[side B]

036 Everyone's voice is important, even if it is uneducated.

054 More reflections on Howard Fuller--his relationship with the city council and his
encouragement of local citizens to stand up for their rights.

069 Discussion of reaction of city council to organizers.

095 Some city council members and mayor Wense Grabarek physically "turn their backs" in
meetings with Atwater and other community organizers.

107 City officials turned fire hoses onto Atwater and other peaceful organizers during
demonstrations; protesters were also harassed by the Klan.

125 Discussion of the Durham "riots."

142 Atwater was sometimes spat on and doused with water when she protested or
approached people about her cause.

156 Although Atwater was not pleased when the "riot" broke out, the protests did capture
the attention of the city.

170 United, the black community had power; divided, they had none.

182 Since her involvement with OBT during the 1960s, Atwater served on OBT's board for
six years. She also makes an effort to know about the programs OBT offers so she can
refer people there.

190 OBT used to "bring the service to the people" and now the people must go find the
service. Consequently, not as many people use OBT as they could. She wishes the
organization could once again go out into the community.

217 Atwater shows the interviewers her numerous awards, including the Rosa Parks award,
and a proclamation from the city declaring "Ann Atwater Day."

250 Atwater talks about her trip to Texas to receive the Rosa Parks award and what the
awards mean to her.

282 Atwater was the first black vice chairman of the Durham Democratic Party.

291 Discussion of the importance of middle class blacks helping their poor counterparts.
306 Atwater believes when she tries to solve a problem, she looks at the whole situation
instead of offering piecemeal responses like others do.

- 309 Atwater sees several problems with the Department of Social Services today and is currently having difficulties with the agency trying to receive enough money to support her grandchildren.
- 352 Atwater tries to help a woman whose 12 year-old daughter is skipping school and sleeping with a 17 year-old boy. Atwater talks about how she would have handled the situation if the girl was her own daughter. In fact, she had several problems with her youngest daughter when she was a child.
- 380 Serving the community took a big toll on Atwater's physical and emotional health because she constantly worried about the people she was trying to help.
- 390 Sometimes Atwater has doubts about her efforts.
- 400 Faith in the Lord carries Atwater through life and guides her when she makes decisions.
- 419 A book is being written about Atwater's life.
- 432 A woman in California has also written a screenplay about her life.
- 440 She hopes that all her hard work will eventually pay so that she can take care of herself and her family.
- 442 [End of interview].