

Mary Hebert: What were the people in Clarendon County like? Obviously, you visited Clarendon county.

Felicia Woods: And you covered it as a news reporter?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: When you see the display down there at the school, you'll see a picture down there called Freedom Fighters. They looked nothing like freedom fighters. They were just ordinary people. And they were determined that whatever the causes were or whatever the consequences were, they were going to fight it out. And they raised money in churches and all around, the dollar contributions, and all around. During the struggle the school the Black school was burned down, the principal's house was burned down.

Mary Hebert: You covered all of this? You were there?

Felicia Woods: Did you actually see the burning?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: No. Saw the result. Most of the deliberations from the early deliberations were held in, of all places, the Liberty Hill Methodist Church, AME Church in Clarendon County. With it named Liberty, I used to think about how significant this was be, Liberty Hill AME Church. But it was very, very, very interesting.

Felicia Woods: Do you remember whether your family was involved in the church at all?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Hm-mm.

Mary Hebert: Were you active in the NAACP throughout this period? Were you a member of the NAACP?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Yeah. Yeah. I was a member, but I didn't do anything for the NAACP but cover these cases. They knew I was here to cover cases and they would write to the headquarters in Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh would assign me to cover.

Mary Hebert: They would request you?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Well, they knew I was the only person here. They didn't have to request. They would request.

Mary Hebert: How do you think your coverage of these cases and the lynchings affected the civil rights movement? Do you think it had an impact on the Black community's willingness to step out, and take chances, and to fight the system of segregation?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Well, all support helps. And they knew that my main support was exposing these things. As long as you could do something and you didn't have—See, the great fear was publicity. That was a great fear that what we doing is going to be exposed. And you had the White papers that were part of the establishment. And the White papers weren't going to expose it all, they were going to expose it with their slant in their way. And so by having a Black newspaper, a Black reporter, I had a tremendous impact. I knew I had anybody else in my same position would've had the same thing, I do believe. But I had tremendous impact on it. The battle to break down segregation, University of North Carolina, I was pivotal in that.

Mary Hebert: How so?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: By exposing it.

Mary Hebert: Exposing it.

Alexander McAllister Rivera: By exposing it. And the thing about it, everybody, as soon as they had a problem, came right here where you sitting to tell me. And a lot of it I wouldn't even have to go out to investigate it. They'd bring it to me because they knew that this was the only way they were going to get it in the paper.

Mary Hebert: Were there other Black reporters like yourself?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: There was another Black newspaper here to Carolina Times.

Felicia Woods: But no other—

Alexander McAllister Rivera: But they didn't have national. I was working for the largest Black paper in the country. So what I wrote went nationally. What I wrote was read by the White House, the Senate, the Congress, everybody. You understand? Not because of me, but because I was working for the largest newspaper in the world. When Nixon got ready to go to Africa, he said, "I want Alex Rivera to go to Africa with me." And he wasn't thinking about going to Africa without some Blacks anyway, but we won an award together. And so he knew me and he asked for me to go with him. And that was March 1957, to the independence of Ghana.

Mary Hebert: Did you know Nixon before he asked you to go? I just wasn't clear on that. You said y'all were in the war together and—

Alexander McAllister Rivera: No, we weren't in the war. We won an award together.

Mary Hebert: Oh, won an award. I'm sorry. What kind of award?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: He was for—Mine was for reporting. We reported the impact of the Brown

decision. And he won an award, I don't know what it was for, but we were receiving these awards together at the same time.

Mary Hebert: And so you'd met him. Okay. I wasn't clear on that.

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Yeah. Yeah.

Felicia Woods: Can you tell us, is there any one particular highlight or several highlights of your career that are most distinguished by you?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: You see what I was saying is that it was all a day's work with me. And some things were interesting. And I gave you the one that was most exciting, was the one I thought I was going to lose my life. I guess that would be—Yeah. Because I knew I was gone then.

Mary Hebert: Did you maintain any contact with Nixon after the trip to Ghana?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I visited him at his home. And we had a reunion for the group that went to Africa with him and so forth. And we corresponded.

Mary Hebert: This is going way back to the beginning of our interview, but you said you established the News Bureau at Central. What did that involve? Establishing a news service, did you have to start from scratch?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Yeah. Because it didn't have any. It involved the preparation of stories and pictures about the university. But by me being a photojournalist, then I also did for this whole area. Then when our teams played another team in this area, other schools didn't have photographers and they'd ask us, "Please send us some pictures of the game when you get back." So our stuff was going all around everywhere. And that's why people knew what we were doing.

Mary Hebert: I have one more question. I don't know if Felicia has any others, but I was reading about you being student body president of Central, of your senior class, and how Dr. Shepard really wanted you to do something else and to work for the school paper. How did that play out? How did that—

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Well—

Speaker 5: I thought I had lost this, but that's the award he got—

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Turn this off.

Alexander McAllister Rivera: [INTERRUPTION 00:08:18]

Mary Hebert: Now, you're talking about student body president and that situation.

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Well, I'd already told you that. Dr. Shepard treated me like a son of his.

Speaker 5: Need anything?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: And so—

Speaker 5: Need anything? You want me to hand you—

Alexander McAllister Rivera: This was a relationship that we had all the time. Well, the student body acclimation voted me present of the student body. I didn't campaign for it or anything. I was a little, as a student, I was a little older than my classmates because as I told you at Howard, I dropped out of school and that's why I was out about three or four years. So I came here. I was older than most of them. So I'd also had the background experience at Howard University. And I had no fear of Dr. Shepard whatsoever because he was just like an uncle. So I was outspoken. So by being outspoken, the kids said, "Well, here's the person we need to represent us." So here I was. So Dr. Shepard not having control of the student government says—And he wanted to control everything. He said, "No, I don't want you to be president of student body. I want you to be editor of the school newspaper."

Alexander McAllister Rivera: I said, "But the students want me to be president of student body." So that's what I'm going to be. They asked me to be president. He said, "Well, I'm not going to give you a place to meet." I said, "Well, we'll find somewhere to meet." So we used to meet in front of the dining room there. I knew to have the meeting in front of the dining hall because I'd always have an audience. I knew I'd have a good audience coming in that dining room. So we'd have our meeting after lunch. We always had our meetings after lunch because I have a built-in crowd coming out of the dining. And I would tell him and speaking out there that, "Okay, Dr. Shepard, we are now meeting in God's auditorium. Now, what are you going to do about that?" It was just one of those things.

Mary Hebert: What kinds of programs did you enact as student body president?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: We didn't do anything. I think we changed the climate. Everything was so austere and so tyrannical. The girls had to be in by certain times. The boys' dormitories were locked by midnight. And there are a lot of things, those are some of the things that we were able to change. But most of all, we were able to change the attitude of the administration in some small measure toward the student body. See, the school and administration felt that they had the personal responsibility for each person's safety and whatnot. And it was a little tough. So that's about the only thing we did.

Mary Hebert: So there was more student participation?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Yeah.

Mary Hebert: The student voice was heard more.

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Yeah. They were kind of following my leadership. I don't think we did a whole lot. But in the short time, it's usually a year, but that's a short time they're doing and go to school too.

Mary Hebert: Can you compare the differences between living in the segregated south? And I know Washington wasn't that much different, but was there a difference in?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Washington was a segregated as any place I ever lived in my life.

Mary Hebert: So they had the same Jim Crow laws in Washington as they had in Durham?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Let me see, I'm trying to think of the name of the biggest store there in town. Black women couldn't try on anything. And you tried on a hat, you bought it. That was yours. And so if you didn't know anything about it and you tried on three hats, you bought three hats because you didn't try on anything. Now, when I say anything, I am sure that they had to try on shoes, but no other clothing that I know anything about.

Mary Hebert: So Black business districts were very important because you didn't have to go through that kind of—

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Oh, yeah. Now, they had a hard, fast, distinct segregation. Theaters, everything. Now, we didn't have any Black theaters here, but in Washington DC, they had Black theaters. They weren't owned by Blacks. They were owned by Jews, but they were operated by Blacks.

Felicia Woods: Owned by Jews.

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Owned by Jews, but they were operated, ticket takers, and managers, and all that were all Black.

Mary Hebert: So Blacks who went to theaters here in Durham, had to go through a back entrance and sit in the balcony?

Alexander McAllister Rivera: Yep. Yeah. All except we had one Black theater in Hayti and that's the only Black theater. They had one Black theater here that was called the Regal. R-E-G-A-L, Regal.

Mary Hebert: The Regal Theater. Do you have any more questions? I'm sure that the—