

Abraham Woods: Frankfully, the civil rights struggle was what I considered to been the period of birth for a new Birmingham. It was agonizing and painful. But out of all of that came a new Birmingham. I am happy that I was a part of it. In fact, police used to shoot down Black people without questioning. It was that kind of thing too that became a catalytic agent to bring about the election of First Black mayor. I was instrumental in leadership of Black people in the city to protest the shooting of young girl who'd been shot in the back several times with magnum pistol by the police. Unarmed. Yes.

Abraham Woods: Her name was Ms. Carter. I remember her first name. Bonita Carter. Bonita Carter. And this took place in 1979. In fact, it was that year that we led the largest group in protests to city hall since the heyday of the civil rights struggle. We had about four, 5,000 people that went to city hall saying that that policeman had to go. And since the mayor wasn't doing anything about it, his name, but David Vann, we said he had to go too. And so they did nothing to this policeman. Said that he was within policy and that nothing they going to do to him.

Abraham Woods: And so we took up the cry of changing the city government already elected a Black mayor and a lot of people said we were crazy, said never happen. But the miracle took place. Mayor Richard Arrington was elected and what happened is the White electorate was larger than the Black electorate, but Black people had been galvanized into action by that senseless, bloody killing of this young girl, unarmed girl, Bonita Carter. And they came out to vote. 80 or 90% of the Black electorate came out broke. And even though Whites made up a larger part of the electorate, that large turnout overshadowed the White vote and Richard Arrington was elected.

Abraham Woods: A lot of Black folk and White folk were shocked at that. And of course we've been able to keep him in office from that point to this one because a lot of White people have moved out and the Black population has increased considerably over the White population here in the city. But White people never really have accepted him. I think the highest White vote he got has been about 12%, but not over 14% of the White vote, in spite of what he's done for the city. So this city is a new city. I was instrumental in raising \$50,000 mostly from the White community and erecting a statue out there for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And in fact I took great pride, I posed for that statue. It's King's head.

Stacey Scales: Oh yeah?

Abraham Woods: But it's my body. (laughs)That's true.

Stacey Scales: All right? I got to go look at it again.

Abraham Woods: (laughs) How about you go look at it again. The sculptor needed somebody to pose, and nd since I was leading the project, he asked me. And frankly, to tell you the truth, there has been a time in

my life when I had the right haircut and whatnot. I was mistaken for Dr. King. I was over at 6th Avenue Baptist Church on occasion, and Dr. King was going to speak. Some fella just kept looking at me and smiling, and I just kept smiling. Then he finally came up, said, "We're so glad to have you, Dr. King. We're so glad you could come." I looked around and I said, "Well, I'm not Dr. King. "No." He was surprised.

Abraham Woods: But that statue is a great symbol and it's out there in the park of my battleground where we sought to leave the church and would come in contact with the police and the dogs and whatnot there. But Birmingham and with the Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham is, we can call it our city now. It is really moved from being a tragic city and it can become a magic city. We used to call it Bombingham, but we can call it Birmingham now. So there have been tremendous changes. In fact, everything has changed and to some extent nothing has changed.

Abraham Woods: Racism is still alive. And if you scratch beneath the surface, you see White flight and you school system is now about 90% Black in the city, Whites continuing to move out and Whites refusing to support Richard Arrington Jr. Tried to send him off to the justice department, sought to set him up and sent him off to the penitentiary, investigated him for eight long years, couldn't find nothing, tried to entice him into something like they did Barry in Washington and they were determined to send him to the penitentiary. We had to rise up and counteract that. Some other thing, you see. So it tell you that racism is not there. And so I say everything has changed. But then the economic situation, to use the old cliché, we got some of our civil rights, C-I-V-I-L, but the long ways from getting our S-I-L-V-E-R, silver rights, the economic situation continues to move away from us.

Abraham Woods: You know the per capita income between Black and White, the gap is wider, you see? And so in some instances everything has changed and in the same instance, nothing's changed. They just keep changing the rules too and this whole thing, you see. But it's a different city.

Abraham Woods: Now, what else do you want?

Stacey Scales: If you have anything else you'd like to share or think of?

Abraham Woods: Yes, I guess the latest thing I did was to challenge a private golf club, Shoal Creek. A few years ago they were having the PGA here, and golfers from around the country was coming. And somebody asked Mr. Hall Thompson, who is big wheel over there, who developed that Shoal Creek Club, about Blacks coming and playing. He said, "No, we don't do that kind of thing down here."

Abraham Woods: So I certainly could not hold my peace and made it very clear that I thought we had moved but beyond the Bull Connor era, you see. And of course then we decided that Shoal Creek, which did not have any Black members, should open up its membership for Blacks to have the PGA here. And they resisted and we threatened to boycott and demonstrate. And many of the financial supporters start dropping out and losing their financial supporters, they wanted the pressure to come to some odds.

Abraham Woods: They tried to get me to call it off, but I just held a tight and said we were going to have it.

And finally when so many of the businesses dropped sponsorship, they was met when others made them. Either you sell this thing, are we moving this PGA to another city. And so we did force them to put a Black member in the club and they promised to get another Black member, you see. And of course that opened the doors around the country. Many private clubs opened up not only for minority but for womens. And the PGA did take some steps too toward the racial inclusion too. And of course the thing that we're trying to do now, we're trying to, we got to suit in, along with some other people around the state to make them let judges run by districts and have some of those districts predominantly Black.

Abraham Woods: Because we have 2% of the judges are Black. And I think we going to win that case pretty soon. So we are still moving, trying to improve our city, our state, our nation. I never forget though, being a deputy director for the March on Washington. I worked at Dr. King's office, and was deputy director for the March on Washington. It was my job to fly around the southeast and back and forth to New York, mobilizing, mobilizing, trains, buses, planes, whatnot.

Abraham Woods: And that was really a satisfying kind of thing when we got to Washington to see people coming from everywhere, like the number that John saw. And I was standing right in the shadow of that huge statue of Lincoln in that chair right behind King who was speaking and saw that great sea of folk out there. And they said 250,000, but that was over half a million people there that we never been given our rightful number there.

Abraham Woods: But the impact of that things got better because 16th Street had been, was bombed later in September. We went up there in August and 16th Street was bombed. And I'm telling you that was a tragic situation indeed. I almost got stoned by some Black fellas on that day. I left the church nauseated and sick, got to the corner and there they were with piles of rocks and every Black—White car—car that passed with a White person in it, they were throwing.

Abraham Woods: And I got that in time and here was a little old White man. He was all bloody, a little White woman. And they were stoning her. And I told them to stop, don't do this, like Dr. King said. And they said to me, "So you mean to tell me after they did what they did to our little girls? You tell us don't do that." They threw back rocks at me. So I said, "I'm sorry, brother. Don't do that." And I went on.

Stacey Scales: That was their way of retaliating?

Abraham Woods: That was their way of retaliating. That's right. But Birmingham has come a long ways in spite.

Stacey Scales: During your travel, how would you fare on the highway? Because of the—

Abraham Woods: Well, you can, they seem to be mighty nice. I just got back in town from going to Richmond, Virginia.

Stacey Scales: I went in like the '40s and '50s?

Abraham Woods: Oh, in the forties and fifties. What the difference?

Stacey Scales: Oh, like the gas stations or just traveling up and down the highway?

Abraham Woods: Yeah. Well you going to gas station place like that, you didn't know when you were going to get attacked. When you was going to run into a crazy or racist person. You know, could go in a little gas station or stand or anything. And if something happened or said the wrong thing, they was in the wrong room. Something you could get attacked, you see. So you always felt yourself somewhat at risk and going through some of the times you just met folk that might attack you anyhow.

Abraham Woods: And some places they would, you see, you knew not to stop, start bating through that. Don't stop in that. Just keep right straight going. You see. So it's a big change now. And I was coming to my wife, I stopped at the gas station and all the White folks were speaking, "You see how courteous these White folks are?" So it's a big change. Big change. Okay. Right.

Stacey Scales: Well I appreciate your interview.

Abraham Woods: Okay. You said you had-