

**The Project in Interpreting the Texas Past
Dr. Martha Norkunas, Project Director**

**African American Texans
Oral History Project**

Interviewee: Gary L. Bledsoe

Interviewer: Naoko Kato

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Teacher Questions

1) Political Organizing, Strategy, and Participation: Bill Clinton and Coexisting

Why does Gary Bledsoe have such a high regard for President Bill Clinton? How does Mr. Bledsoe use the example of Bill Clinton to understand his own work and his role in society? What does Mr. Bledsoe feel is necessary to do today in order for humanity to continue to survive? What quote does he invoke to support this?

Running Time: 6 min 12 sec

GB: He's a brilliant man, because I think that, and personal life and all that aside, you have to look at what made other people fear him so much. And you couldn't really pigeon hole him. He did some things I didn't agree with, that I still would say I did not agree with. But you couldn't say that he was all environmental

versus business, or that he was all business versus environmental. You couldn't say he was all minority versus southern white. You couldn't say that. He tried to ingest information, understand the dynamics that were involved, and the likely impact on different constituencies, and tried to come up and shape something that was wise for everyone. So it may not be exactly what someone wanted. Because I guess that's one thing, if you really look at the things he pushed through, except for his health care proposal, his ability to compromise did show. And so he would always listen to the right, or listen to the left because he was really a centrist. And he'd come out with something that may not make anyone feel great, but it was the best thing with all in the hodgepodge. And that's what it's about you know, instead of having someone say, "Well I'm on the left, it's all going to be about the left." "I'm on the right, it's all going to be about what's on the right." Because really the answer is not necessarily on the left or the right. Sometimes it might be, sometimes it may not be. But most people are in the center. So he's probably the one human being that I can think of that has been able to do that. There are some other presidents and folks that I admire, but in terms of melding that or what have you, and having a true genius for that, he's really the one. He's really a genius in that regard. So I really think he's a great example. And so he is somebody, I would think is somebody that I would like to take to a page from in that regard. You just could not pigeon hole him.

NK: How would you see your work going in the future?

GB: It's very frustrating. I happen to live in a very difficult time to choose to do what I do. Because the winds of time are not with me. And the winds of time are with the other side of people who want to divide, who want to hate. Justice Jackson once said one thing that's so profound. He said, "We don't live in a pure democracy because if we did the majority would run roughshod over the minority." And that has been the beauty of the American system, that there is protections built in for minorities that you don't have elsewhere. So you can go and be a different religion, different racial group or ethnic group and coexist, and be under the same flag and support the same institutions. But we just have not lived up to what the possibilities are, and we're moving away from how far we're going. I think we were closer in the 70s than we are now, because I think people know--one of the biggest problems we have is individual ambition. Because of individual ambition, politicians can't ever do the right thing.

And it may be kind of a contradiction to what I just said about Clinton earlier but I don't think so. Because I think that Clinton really didn't please the left when he did welfare reform, or when he said mend affirmative action, but don't end it. I don't think it got him a lot of support. What I'm saying is that it's a whole melting pot, we have to all live together and coexist together. You know an old friend of mine, Joe Crews said that he was--I asked him who he was supporting for student body president after the student body bar association president was

removed at the Law School. He said, "I'm supporting David Smith. He's a good white guy like me." I said, "Oh okay." So I hadn't really thought about that. We had minorities running and winning, and I supported a couple of minorities. And I said well, "You're right." I supported the same guy, because it made sense. You just can't have this is not all me and you get nothing over here because you happen to be a white male.

But everybody has to give and to meet each other somewhere, somewhere in between. That's where the genius is. If you can get people to see that, where it's just not fundamental like we're back in caveman days. Well, you know, you look a certain way so you're my enemy. So all you have to do is see somebody who looks different, and they're your enemy. And that's where you are. What we're trying to do is set an example for the world and say, "Look over in the Middle East, you can live, you can coexist together. You don't have to hate each other." There is a way to do that and it's really up to us to do that or we're going to end up, especially with the sophistication of weaponry and all that, we can see where we're going now with terrorism and things like that.

Martin Luther King's words are just so, so omnipresent in my mind. Because if we don't learn how to live together as brothers, we are really going to perish as fools, because these kinds of weapons are getting on the black market and none of us are going to be safe. People can use airplanes for weapons and just kill

people indiscriminately without regard to who they are or their families or whatever, innocent people. You know it's a sad time that we live in, that people would do that, and thinking that they're doing something to honor God. And it's just going to get worse right now. Unless we really grab the bull by the horns and somebody that's really got the true conviction and the belief of what it's going to take to bring about humanity within humanity, we're not going to be around another year.

2) Race and Justice System: Advice to Young People

What advice does Mr. Bledsoe give to young people seeking to change the world? Where does this advice come from? What are some of the examples from Mr. Bledsoe's life that demonstrate a need to change the world? How does Mr. Bledsoe define human rights? Why are jurors sometimes afraid to vote their conscience?

Running Time: 6 min 42 sec

GB: If I had advice [to give] to a young person today, it would be "don't give up your conviction," and, "always have a heart." But you also should have a head, and take care of yourself. Because, I'm one that wanted to change the world, and not really look out at some of those other basic needs, thinking well, those really aren't important. They really are. There's something about history and experience and the need to go out there financially to get a stable foundation and things of that nature before you can do other things. So I would advise people to try to go get a stable financial foundation, not forget where you came from. And when you get that foundation, then you go out you don't forget where you came

from. Don't get to be caught up in the almighty dollar and then to try to really give something back at the right point in time. Whether that means you quit a thriving law practice with some defense firm where you're making a half million a year, and then decide, "Well I'm fifty years old. I'm going to go out there, the next fifteen years, I'm just going to help the little people, and do what I can, because I'm blessed. I'm thankful for what the Lord has provided to me in terms of having this education, having good health, having an opportunity to do things. I'm taken care of financially now, so let me try to give something back." And say, "I'm thankful for the University for giving me a good education," or what have you because all those things factor in.

NK: So being thankful is the core of your conviction. You said you should remember where you come from, and be thankful. Where does that idea come from?

GB: It probably comes from my mom. I mean really and truly. She probably raised me to do certain things and to believe in certain ways. And so in turn she would ask me questions, "Are you going to defend people, or are you going to put them in jail? Or are you going to do this, or are you going to do that?" She wouldn't try to volunteer an answer, but it was just different things, because I could see so many things happen that were wrong. And you would just shake your head. When I was in the sixth grade, I was walking to school and I get

picked up for stealing a car. And I was young. I was, I guess I may have been ten years old at the time, because I was a year ahead. I couldn't even think about driving a car at that time. But you know, the police officer [said], "Whatch you boys doing?" and my cousin was in the class with me, he was a year older than I was. Put us in the car, took our names and did reports and all that. "We had a car stolen from those old green apartments last night." That leaves a lasting impression with you. Because I'm walking to school, I would get there an hour or so late, two hours late. I was late, I don't remember how late, but I was late. And couldn't even think about driving a car at that point in time, didn't know how to turn, didn't know how to put a key in an ignition. But I get picked up and held for no reason.

You see things like that happen throughout, and it just leaves an impression on you because it happened to my friends. It happened to family members. And at some point you say, "Look, there ought to be a better way." And it isn't about being political correct. It isn't about having someone ascribe to your view. There are some things that are fundamental, that go beyond me or my religion, or my background. Some things like you said are fundamental human rights. There are some things that are just fundamental, and right and justice are fundamental. We don't have the right to take another person's life. So if a police officer does that, they're wrong. Unless they're trying to defend their life or the life of a third person, it's legitimate. But you can't say just because somebody's Black or their

Brown or whatever that you can take their life. And that's essentially the current state of what we have in the State today because a minority life is just not worth the same as a White life.

I remember one time driving, not driving but I [was] on the bus, sharing a charter bus one time, going to a convention in Houston, and an old white gentleman who had headed up the probation department here, I was on the bus with him. I was opining how a jury in the Rodney King case could walk someone when it was on videotape, and how in this case in Fort Worth it was on videotape where a police officer cracks the guy's head open, they can no bill this guy, a grand jury. He said "Well Gary," and this was a good man, so he wasn't talking about himself. "We talk about these higher beliefs like the rights guaranteed by the constitution, and the things that you can't do to another person because of their rights. Most folk would say or believe that that does not apply to you, and that's what you need to understand." Because, how can you go to church on Sunday and say that you are a Christian person, and say that you believe in scripture and all that and sit there on the grand jury or jury, and there's compelling evidence and just allow somebody to get away with it?

I know I lost a case in East Texas one time. But the DA's argument there was so compelling. As always it left a lasting impression on me. Because it looked like we were going to win, and it was a real uphill battle. But the DA told the jury, he

said: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, your deliberations are private, but I want you to know that your verdict is public. It'll be etched into the folklore of this community forever. You, your children, and your children's children have to live in this community, and don't you forget it." So it was true jury nullification. It was truly telling them that your neighbors are what's important. What's right is not what's important. What God would want is not important. That you have to live in this community, and your children--see, he knows a lot of people will say, "Well I'm courageous and so I don't mind. I may suffer some pressures. I'm going to go ahead and do this," and "you, your children and your children's children." So everybody's going to say, "Well, I mean, I couldn't do this to my grandkids." So it's true jury nullification. Saying, "Yeah, you can go back there and it's private. When you come out here, your verdict is public." And the thing is, if the verdict is unanimous and they know it's unanimous if it's on our side. So it took them a few days, but they finally came out in his favor.

3) Race and the Justice System: Laws and Courts

Mr. Bledsoe has worked as a lawyer for most of his life. How does he feel the courts operate now? Is this a fair system? How is the court system today different from the 1950s and 1960s court system, according to Mr. Bledsoe?

Running Time: 4 min 2 sec

NK: I had the impression initially that you wanted to go to Law School to change

the law and maybe, when people are young you have these great dreams.

GB: And I was wrong, about what I could accomplish. The world has changed. It's gotten [to be] a very conservative, very hostile world that we live in right now. The opinions that are coming out of the courts are really bad and sad, and I'm not a good enough lawyer to change the things the way that I'd want to, because right now the courts are result oriented. And it takes someone who's really a genius or whatever to pull the fat out of the fire here, because it doesn't matter from what I have seen, how good your scholarship or whatever. It depends on what side you're on or what have you.

I can give you an example. I was reading this court of appeals opinion the other day and a woman was sexually harassed nine times in fourteen days. They said it was not sufficiently pervasive to constitute sexual harassment. So I'm thinking, "Well, do you want her to bring a gun to work and blow the guy away?" You know, what kind of a social policy is it just because you want to support the employer? You come out with this thing and say that nine times in fourteen is not enough? It's absurd. There's nothing I can do about it because they're putting these result oriented judges on the courts, and people who look like me, and think like me, are people they're going to decide against. It's the bottom line. So I made a big mistake. I was thinking that, the courts even before, you know, one of the big ironies, the great strides that we made were strides that the courts

allowed us to make, and even very conservative judges looked at the law and just implemented the law, whether *Sweatt v. Painter*, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Where people just looked at the law and said, "This is what the law says." Johnny Cochran told me once that what a lot of these judges are doing now, and particularly the judges in this circuit, "They're engaging in intellectual mischief." And that's really true, because you find some fiction not to follow the law. If you're going to confine me and limit me to some very bad law to begin with, at least be able to live up to it and not just come up with some fiction or technicality why I can't avail myself of the law. Because years ago like with what the NAACP did is it took the separate but equal doctrine and decided, "Well we're not going to change it right now. Let's just enforce it." So when you put the Thurgood Marshall Old Texas Southern Law School and compared it to the University of Texas Law School, there's no way you can compare the two. You just had to be honest about it.

I'm afraid if *Sweatt v. Painter* were heard today, that the judges would say that it's an equal law school or that even Texas Southern would be greater because of low class student faculty, or faculty student ration or whatever. They would come up with some fiction to justify the decision. And so that's one of the big differences that we have, you know. There were a lot of judges, and ironically Republican judges in the 50s and 60s, Minor Wisdom and people like that, that were the ones that were the real champions of minorities here, in the 5th Circuit

and throughout the country. That they could see the real ills of the South, and so they were the ones who stood up and implemented affirmative action and things like that, and which has now become a buzz word or a divisive word. And it's really ironic that it was the Republican Party back then that was really the biggest supporter of the African American community in the South there in that regard.

4) Family Life

What were some of Mr. Bledsoe's family experiences in Texas? What kind of stories did his family pass on? Why are these stories important to Mr. Bledsoe?

Running Time: 4 min 41 sec

NK: I wanted to start with perhaps just talking about your parents: where they came from and what their experiences were like?

GB: Oh, my parents are from a small town in Texas or small towns really, from Lott and Marlin and that's in Falls County. It's an extremely--it's one of the two big poorest counties in Texas. The Brazos River runs through there. They grew up in farming families or what have you. And of course, they did as most African Americans did, they picked cotton and chopped cotton, and did all kinds of odd jobs and things to make a living. You know, my dad had to drop out in the seventh grade to help his family to make ends meet, and to work every day

to help bring in revenue. My mom was fortunate enough to go through high school and go to college and become a nurse, though she worked just as hard, didn't have the same kind of experiences with her family. But they both came from very large families.

NK: How many for example?

GB: Thirteen in my mom's side and nine on my dad's. Large families.

NK: And they came from the same area?

GB: Yes, both from Falls County.

NK: And that's where they met. Interesting. So when they tell family stories to you, what kind of family stories have you heard growing up?

GB: Oh there are a lot of stories that they tell--some good stories, stories about character, stories about conviction, stories about, "Whatever you do, hold your head up and be proud of yourself." Mom would tell the story about how her dad would not allow them to slump after working a full day and chopping cotton and working for fourteen hours and leaving the fields to take his family home. Maybe the kids would slump or stoop or have bad posture. He would

scold them, and he made sure that they always acted like they were somebody. I thought that was really a kind of a very good story. My dad liked to tell a story about how honest his dad was, and how there was a neighbor lady that had lost, that had said she lost her chickens. She asked could he come over and help her catch her chickens. When he got over to her home, she came to the door with no clothes on, and said "I think they're in here Mr. AC." He said, "No thank you ma'am. I'll look for them out here." But [laugh] you know, some of the good stories like that.

NK: So when they were passing on some values, do you think they were through these kinds of stories? Or through their action or?

GB: Both. There were a lot of things. They would tell some of the horrors. My dad talked about how when they had terrible time during the Depression. His dad was pretty good at maintaining things and that a white landowner just came in one day and just took all their cattle. And the authorities would do nothing and all that to help them get them back. They just took them, and the man owned them and they knew where they were and the whole thing, but not having any rights. They both would talk about the law enforcement in the community, and how many people were beaten or things of that nature. How when they first hired a Black deputy he could only arrest Blacks. He couldn't arrest whites or what have you, they didn't allow him to carry a gun and things of that nature. So

there're a lot of interesting stories. There are even stories like the hanging of the Black man in Waco, and a few years later when the tornado follows the same path as the mob that took the man and hung him, the last one to be hung, I guess in Waco. So, there are a lot of stories like that. My mom tells the story about how an aunt of hers just had her land taken away by a white male, whose family owns the property today. That's one thing I've thought of, of different ways one could prove this, to be able to, to try to get the family's land back.

5) Segregation in Schools/ Brown v. Board of Education, Desegregation and Integration of Schools

How did Mr. Bledsoe experience racism while attending a segregated school in the 1960s? How was his school different from the white schools in terms of what it could offer? What happened in the Texas school system after Brown v. Board of Education in 1954?

Running Time: 4min 52 sec

GB: I graduated high school in the 70s, early 70s.

NK: So how about your school?

GB: Things have changed. I don't think it'd be the same nowadays, but I actually thought I got an extremely good education, providing the circumstances. We had hand me down books. In other words, when I got a book, it was the first time our school would get a book, frequently. But there would no signature plates for me,

for my name in front of the book, because it was a “hand me down” from one of the white schools across town. So we usually had hand me down books. Our lab equipment was just incredibly, or woefully inferior to the labs across town. So in science and things like that, we didn't have the things to learn. We had a great ROTC program. We had a great shop where you could learn, if you wanted to do body work or mechanic work, we had better than across town. But anything that was academic, we didn't have. We didn't have a debate team, so we couldn't debate. We had a spelling bee and I won the spelling bee in my school, but they wouldn't allow me to compete because the teachers in my school were afraid that I would win. I actually could spell very well. And so, that always left a real lasting impression on me, that people were that afraid that a Black guy was likely to win. My sister had won the science competition a year or two before me, and she was given second place. So we were all really upset over that. Because it was obvious--if you saw her display and the other girl's display--she was far superior. It was the same general theme, but my sister's was put together much better and was a much tighter presentation. But anyway, she got second place so it was just one of these things, when you grew up in that era, you could not give accolades to the African American. I had some really good teachers. I don't like the fact that many were afraid, they didn't want me to go forward, like with the spelling bee. But I had some really good teachers that taught good values, that were concerned about you. Teachers that, when they used corporal punishment, except you know maybe one was not, but usually they all did it with your best

interests at heart. And so, we had teachers that were concerned about you becoming a good citizen. That was all good, and you know things were a lot different because we knew who the bad actors were, and though we didn't talk down to folks or what have you, you knew who not to hang with and things of that nature. Everyone knew who the bad actors were. It wasn't--bad actors were not exalted the way that many bad actors are today.

NK: Officially, the Voting Rights Act was in 1965.

GB: That's correct.

NK: Schools had been desegregated. [Schools were desegregated by law after Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. The Voting Rights Act directly addressed segregation at the polls.]

GB: No they hadn't.

NK: Officially.

GB: The laws were there.

NK: The laws were there.

GB: The laws were there, but in Texas they didn't even try to comply with the law. In 1966, they shut down the Black school in my hometown, and merged it with the brown school. The white schools you could go to by choice. They'd all implemented a choice program. Like in Austin, they did something similar and minor to that in 1971. Austin didn't get full desegregation until 1979. My old school district didn't get full desegregation until I believe it was 1983. Most of the South fought desegregation. So, when we had Brown v. Board to come down, you had this flurry of new school districts to be created, school districts that were created where there were no Blacks living within the geographical boundaries, or no Hispanics living within the geographical boundaries, so they wouldn't be forced to have their kids go to school with minorities. So in Texas now, we have what, 254 counties and about 1200 school districts or so? It's pretty enormous, the number of school districts. But that's why we have the school districts. You look in some counties like Gray County, their county just has innumerable school districts that they don't need to have, and that's really the reason why many of them were born, was for reasons of race. So I won't concede that point--that may have been, Brown v. Board may have been handed down in '54, but we did not have desegregation at all, in Texas.