

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

**African American Texans  
Oral History Project**

**Interviewee:** Akwasi Evans

**Interviewer:** Jodi Relyea

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**Place:** Mr. Evan's office at NOKOA, the Observer, Austin, Texas

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**Transcriber:** Jodi Relyea

Questions prepared by Erin Murphy, Summer 2006

**Teacher Questions**

**1) Activism / Political Organizing, Strategy, and Participation: Early Activism**

**What were some of the early instances of Mr. Evans' activism while attending an integrated high school in the 1960s? What was the result of his activism while attending Kentucky State University? After being accepted at the University of Kentucky how did he and other African Americans start their own activist campus organization? What activities did this organization allow Mr. Evans and others to take part in?**

**Running Time: 6 min 33 sec**

AE: In 1963, when we first integrated, that was in September. The following month Dr. Martin Luther King came to Kentucky to lead a march on the capital,

and fifteen of us students decided we would go. And we did go march with him in Frankfurt, Kentucky.

JR: You were there.

AE: Yeah, I was there. And, I'll never forget, we returned that following Monday, it was on a Friday. And we got back and went to school Monday morning. The principle called us all to our, to his office and told us that we were suspended, for an unexcused absence. Marching for civil rights was inexcusable.

I got suspended several times at the white high school. I got suspended the following year. As I told you, I was the only African American in the Speech Club. After about three speech meets, I asked the teacher if I could participate. And she finally let me go participate in a speech meet in Cynthiana, Kentucky. I did extemporaneous speaking. I was in two different meets. I placed a very good four points at each meet for a total of eight points. If I had been allowed to be in a second speech meet, and only got a fair, I would have been a thespian. So I asked the teacher if I could go to another speech meet so I could join the Thespian Club. A young lady, a young blonde haired girl, rose up from the back of the room and said the N-word, said, "We let you in the Speech Club, you want to take over every damn thing?" And I got up and said the B-word, I said "I want every damn opportunity you get." The principle called me to his office,

said, "You're suspended" [laughing]. He said, "It's inexcusable to use the B-word in this school." I said, "What about the N-word?" He said, "That's different."

JR: She wasn't punished?

AE: No, of course not. The N-word was okay, but the B-word wasn't. So that was my initiation to the civil rights movement, where I've spent my entire life ever since then.

I went to Kentucky State College, in Frankfort, and in 1968, Dr. King was assassinated on April the fourth. And we rioted. We threw rocks at cars going up and down the highway. We cordoned the campus off, we did not let anybody white on campus. We looted the campus. We didn't riot over King's assassination. We rioted because we had assembled over King's assassination to discuss what we were going to do. And while we were assembled, some young man came back to campus, rushing, and said that up the street a young Black girl had just been hit upside the head with a tire iron by a white guy at a filling station who had tried to rape her. We went berserk. And we just shut--we didn't let anyone back on campus, if they had a white car they had to leave the car off campus. Nobody white, finally they called in the state troopers.

Troopers came in, fired live ammunition at us, tear Gas. They tear gassed our

dorms so bad we had to crawl around the floor with wet towels on our face from, I'd say, two feet up, to the ceiling, was nothing but tear gas. We went till four o'clock in the morning, we literally crawled around, and if we raised up they'd shoot at us. They shot at the girls' dormitory, the freshman girls' dormitory. And that went on for two days, and then, the president suspended school. Sent us all home. And while we were home, some of us who the president decided were ringleaders, got letters saying, "Don't come back." I was one of those who was asked not to come back.

So, I applied for University of Kentucky, which was a white school, and there were very few African Americans there. And to my surprise I was accepted. So I went to UK, and I spent one year there. We were less than one tenth, one percent of the population, we were worse than UT is in terms of population. And, the positive side of that was, we were really tight-knit. All of us were really close, and we fought for what we thought was just and right. We had no budget, and we knew that to be respected on campus as a viable organization, we had to have a budget. So three of our guys decided that they would do a formal protest. They went and got themselves arrested for trying to burn a building down. And they were caught red-handed with newspaper in their hand, that they had lit, matches in their hand, standing in front of a brick building.

JR: What building?

AE: It was one of the classroom buildings, but it was totally brick and glass, no wood anywhere to be seen [laughing]. They were arrested for trying to burn that building down. But that got us fifteen thousand dollars in funding, the following year, because they were on the front page of the newspaper. It got publicity, it brought light to the fact that here we were, a campus organization, the only African American organization on campus, and the only acknowledged organization that wasn't funded. That allowed us to bring in speakers like Angela Davis. Allowed us to travel, to go to conferences. [We] went to Indiana to deal with the problem of apartheid in South Africa. Went to Chicago to form the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression. And that was another turning point was once I joined the National Alliance, Angela Davis, H. Rap Brown, were some of the founding members, our co-chairs. They gave me an assignment of going throughout the South, every state, working on human rights cases, particularly death row issues. I started to--I went to Charlotte, North Carolina, worked on the Wilmington Ten case, Ben Chavis, the Charlotte Three. I worked on the {George Merrick} case. I worked on the {Johnny Moniharris} case in [phone rings] Florida. And was instrumental in helping win all of their freedoms.

## **2) Race and the Justice System/ Effects of Poverty**

**What kind of environment did Mr. Evans grow up in? What were some of the early influences in his life and how did they impact his life**

**choices? When Mr. Evans had to drop out of school because he could not afford the tuition he tried to earn some money. What was the result of this choice? Were things made worse by poverty? How so?**

**Running Time: 6 min 59 sec**

AE: My parents were not married to one another. My father lived in Dayton, Ohio, so my mother was on welfare. And we grew up in extreme poverty in a rural community where there was no jobs, except for working seasonally in tobacco or working on a horse farm. Most people were unemployed. There was a lot of poverty. We didn't feel out of place because everybody was poor around us. But we, we were among the poorest of the poor. We lived in an alley off the street because we couldn't afford to live on the street for a number of years, and finally moved up to a duplex, and, we struggled. My mother got sick with tuberculosis 'cause she smoked a lot, drank a lot.

I went to live with my grandmother, and that's when life started to change, 'cause she was a strict disciplinarian, and a very wise woman for someone with a third grade education. She imparted some of the greatest wisdom I've received from anybody I've met on earth. Salt of the earth, hard-working, honest woman, spent her entire life as a cook for a white family. She worked for a family on a small plantation, and then when she got too old to put out to pasture they, well, they got too old, they gave her to their daughter, and she became a cook for the daughter's family, in town. And, with my grandmother's help, and I had an

aunt also, my mother's sister, half-sister, and she had two master's degrees. She was enthusiastic about education. Aunt Karen pushed all of us to excel. Her own three kids--I remember my first cousin, Mary, making a 'B' one time, and crying for hours and hours 'cause she knew her mother would be disappointed. Her mother wasn't really that disappointed, but her mother wanted her to work harder. I don't remember her making a 'B' again. So, because of my aunt's influence, that made me believe I could.

So, I applied for University of Kentucky, which was a white school, and there were very few African Americans there. And to my surprise I was accepted. So I went to UK, and I spent one year there. And I was still living in Paris and commuting back and forth, but I didn't have a car. But there was a lady who lived in town who worked at the University, and our families were very well acquainted, so, she wanted me to get an education. She would pick me up every day, and give me a ride to the outskirts of town. Then I'd walk seven miles to campus, then walk back after class and wait for her to come home, and catch a ride back home, seventeen miles between Paris and Lexington. And that went on for a year.

Then I dropped out to get some more money 'cause I was on student loan only. And, I didn't go back, at all, and had lost hope of ever getting a chance to go back, and in August of 1969 I got a letter from UK telling me I was readmitted.

But I didn't have any money. So, I went down to the club, or the bar where me and my friends hung out, four of us--drank beer, talked, tell lies, tell stories. And I told the guys, "It's a dagone shame. I just got this letter saying I can go back to school, and I don't have a dagone, [quick laugh] I don't have a penny." And this one guy said, "What's it take for you to go to school?" I said, "Tuition's four hundred dollars." He said, "If you go with me tomorrow, I'll get you four hundred dollars." I said, "How?" He said, "All you gotta' do is drive the car. Piece a cake." So. He was going on a marijuana pick. I drove the car. When we got back to town after gathering the marijuana, we were stopped by a police officer.

JR: You were gathering it from?

AE: From a field in the country. We were stopped. It was four of us in the car. Other three guys jumped out and ran. The officer asked me what I was doing. I told him we were just driving, partying. He says, he had gotten a call, someone'd seen us screeching off. There was no marijuana in the car, that I knew of. What had happened was, the guy who was a dealer, had somebody coming in from Ohio, he told us, to pick it up. So, we took it out to a little farm, it had a tin roof, and spread it out on the tin roof for it to dry. So we left it there, and went back to wait for it to dry, to come back later and get it. But, en route, one of the plastic bags that we put it in, burst, and it spilled all over everything. So one

of the guys went to his house and got a sheet, and we picked it up and put it in the sheet, wrapped it up and took it on out there. And, we decided, after we put it out, we'd leave the sheets there. And we agreed on that. But the one guy who was the dealer decided he was going to save them for his next trip. Well, he didn't tell me that. He didn't tell any of us that. So he threw it in the trunk when none of us was looking. So when the Officer said, "Will you follow me downtown?" I said, "Yeah, gladly," thinking, "I know I'm outta' this now because I don't have anything on *me*." And I didn't smoke marijuana at the time. We went downtown, he said, "You mind if I search your car?" I said, "It's not my car, but I don't mind if you search it." He opened the trunk, there was the sheet. "You're under arrest." I spent two months in jail, and then went to trial. My court appointed lawyer was the brother of the prosecutor. And, my court appointed lawyer told me that being a first offender, and a college student, I'd get probation. I got two years in prison. The other three guys all got probation. The difference was, they made bail, I didn't. That's why I spent two months in jail. My family could not afford two thousand dollars in bail. They would have had to pay two hundred dollars, ten percent, and there was no way they could afford it, we were just much too poor.

### **3) Media – African American Community Newspapers: NOKOA**

**In 1987 Mr. Evans went to a world peace conference in Libya. While he was there he decided he wanted to start a newspaper back in Austin. What was Mr. Evans' plan for this newspaper, NOKOA? What**

**problems did he run into? How did Mr. Evans' envision the paper at the time of its inception and what role does it play in the community today?**

**Running Time: 7 min 8 sec**

AE: I had just, before I had left, I had taken a job for "Third Coast Magazine," writing a story about Clarence Brandley who was on death row, in Huntsville. I went to visit Clarence on death row four times, interviewed him, took pictures of him. I went to Conroe. I did background research on that killing, and found clear evidence that Brandley did not kill that young girl. In fact, the man who had killed her, they knew, he had confessed to his girlfriend. He went to his girlfriend's house that night, told her he killed her and he had to get outta' town. He had left his bloody clothes at her house, and left for North Carolina. He was a janitor at Conroe High School. Clarence Brandley was the head janitor. When the cops came, Brandley was the only Black there. They said, "You raped a sixteen year old girl." They put him on death row, they destroyed evidence, they hid evidence, they lied, and they tried to kill the man. I wrote the story for Third Coast Magazine. Four thousand word story, concise, but tight, and went off to Libya, expecting to come back. I told Lenore, I said, "When I get back, I'm going to take a thousand dollars, that Third Coast Magazine's going to pay me, and I'm going to start my own newspaper.

When I got back, I found out they had filed bankruptcy. They folded, and I was one of the names on the bankruptcy list so I never got paid. I came back with one nickel in my pocket, and I decided I either had to go get another job, or I could start NOKOA on faith. And I decided I'd start NOKOA on faith. So in 1987, in July, I called five friends of mine together and said, "I can't pay you, but I'll give you part ownership in the paper if we get it started." They agreed, and, we kicked off NOKOA in July of 1987.

JR: You and five friends?

AE: Right. All of them fell by the wayside. One of them died, one just dropped out. Joe Washington worked with me for eleven years. He now works for the police department. Another one, [negligible], still a real close friend, she used to work for the Texas Employment Commission. They just couldn't put into it what it needed. After, we had no money. We had no bank loans, so everything came in off of what I could sell in advertising.

And when the money wasn't coming in, the bills couldn't get paid, much like it is now. And so, we had a crisis, and I called a board meeting and asked them, "What do we do?" They all said, "Close the paper down." I said, "No, we're not gonna' do that. I'll go find the money somewhere. I'll make a way. But, I can't give you this percentage of the paper, and you, and you not put anything into it,

or, not help bring anything into it." So, I restructured it. Cut their percents from ten to five, and went out and borrowed five thousand dollars from Genevieve Vaughan, Foundation for a Compassionate Society. I was able to buy some equipment, keep it going.

Then Gen offered to let me move in to her building there on Congress Avenue, rent free. And we operated there for almost two years, rent free. I was able to get on our feet, thanks in large part to Gen. We would have stayed there, but it was too open. Too many people from other organizations had access to our office, and when I'm trying to interview somebody who tells me they've been discriminated against, somebody walks down the hall, so that even though it was a cushion deal, I had to get out and make it on my own.

So, we had another snag, and everything dried up, and I asked them again, "What do we do?" And they said, "Fold it up." I said, "Why don't you all just relinquish your shares, 'cause you haven't put anything into it, you didn't make any investment, you haven't brought anything to the table. Let me either make it live or let it die." And they agreed. And I went back to Genevieve, and somebody else, and borrowed twenty thousand dollars, and re-structured, hired some people, and by the grace of God and some concerned people, eighteen years later we're still publishing.

From the time I started to do the newspaper, I stopped doing poetry. I stayed in the movement, in various capacities, but my focus became on doing it through writing, as opposed to just being in the streets. Although, when things like the shooting of Jesse Lee Owens happened, I helped organize the first protest and was there and put that together and made it happen. I will support movements, I support the NAACP, but I have put forty solid years into the movement, from [19]63 till now. It's time for me to take a break, and work on stabilizing this paper, and spending time with my family.

JR: What was your vision for NOKOA when you started it, what was your?

AE: Being a political activist, I supported the Latinos with Cispus, I supported women with TARAL and NARAL, I supported {Adept} with the movement to have access. I supported Al Gore and others with the gay and lesbian movement. I thought that we all deserve equal opportunity and justice. I had written for the Statesman for a year, I worked for the Villager for a couple years, and I began to recognize that there was no progressive weekly in town. I didn't want another Black newspaper. I wanted something to serve the progressive movement, all cultures. And that's what compelled me to start the paper. And I put the word out in the first issue, and I put it out consistently that this is not a Black newspaper, this is a progressive newspaper with an African American perspective. And, I found the harsh reality that it just wasn't possible. White

Austin still wouldn't accept it. I still get categorized and marginalized as just Black. I've been promoting NOKOA as a progressive weekly for seventeen and a half years, and most businesses I talk to only say Black. Thus we have very little advertisement. Look at the Chronicle, look at NOKOA, and you're talking about night and day. We're struggling now just to keep the doors open because after 9-11, the advertising we did have fell off, was cut in half. So, it's a struggle to keep the doors open still, but, by faith, we go on.

#### **4) Race and the Justice System: Time in Prison**

**What kinds of programs did Mr. Evans help implement while he was in prison? What else did he do for the inmates during his time there? Why was Mr. Evans denied parole the first time he was eligible?**

**Running Time: 6 min 11 sec**

AE: It was a brand new prison, first of all, called Frenchburg Correctional Facility, in Menifee County, Kentucky. It was a brand new minimal security prison. I was the first inmate. My number was one. When I first got there, there were no other inmates, period. I spent four days, just me, and one guard, and the secretary, and the warden. Then they brought in two guys who had killed a girl in a drunk driving wreck. Then they brought in a couple thieves. And it went on, and on.

But there were no books on the entire campus. So I began to complain about not being able to read. And they finally called a book mobile in, and I ordered some books. And I kept on ordering books. And then finally I convinced the warden to let me start a library. And I started a library. And then I convinced the warden to let me start a school. And I started a school, and I taught school. And I ran the library. I was captain of the basketball team; I was captain of the softball team. I taught myself to play piano, a little bit with one hand, and we created a little quartet, two White and two Black, and we'd go downtown to sing gospel, just as a way to get out of the joint.

JR: Who was teaching the school?

AE: I was.

JR: You were teaching.

AE: Me, and another inmate that came in was an older guy in his sixties, and he had been an accountant, or a teacher himself, so he and I put together a curriculum, because these guys were, almost all of them, high school dropouts. So we just [taught the] basics, reading and writing, and basic math. At least it gave them something to do. It taught them something. It got them to reading, and, I thought it was a good thing. I think the whole prison did.

It got to a point where, I was censoring the mail. Being the first inmate, I had seniority, and I had said, I had two hard and fast rules: no homosexuality, and no racial fighting. And, for the entire time I was there, there was only one instance of homosexuality, and they got sent off the same day. There was only one instance of racial fighting. Most of us guys were down on the softball field playing softball, and some of the guys stayed back in the gym and played basketball. And they chose up teams, all white against all Black. When I was there, I didn't allow that, had to be integrated teams. I knew what would happen [laughing] and it did. They played, they chose all white against all Black, and the Black guys won. And the white guys got mad, started throwing weights at them, and [laughing] everything they could find. Run 'em all out of the gym, and, there was a lot of tension that night—

JR: Did that change the, the racial climate from then on, or?

AE: No. The guy who was the perpetrator of most of the violence, throwing all the stuff, was a big, six-foot-seven kluntz from my home town. Eighteen-year-old kid. I was twenty-one at the time. Danny Krump. And [laughing], his bunk was across the hall from mine. And I went to him that night and I said, "Krump, this ain't going to work, man. You're not going to be able to sleep tonight in the barracks, if you don't apologize. You were wrong." And he started sniffing

around, and I said, "Dan, be a man, apologize." I went back up to the day room everybody's sittin' out there. And he come clompin' out in big clod-hoppers [stomping], and walked up to the television set, turned, hit the off knob, turned to us and [in different voice] "I apologize to all the niggers." [laughing] Turned the T.V. back on and went back to his bed. That was good enough for me. That was good enough for the rest of us [laughing]. It diffused everything.

I went up for parole in April, and was turned down. Even though people who'd come in after me had already been paroled out, and I had created all this stuff that nobody else had done. I was also, worked as the cook's assistant.

JR: Do you have any idea why you were turned down?

AE: Yeah. The warden finally told me. I got paroled on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1970. Juneteenth. And he told me, "I'm sorry to see you go." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "We were on probation ourselves. This is a brand new prison, and if you hadn't done what you'd done, we might not have got our funding." They kept me there, I believe, to make sure that they got the funding, to keep things cool. The warden left before I could [laughing]. The guys, number two and number three, the two white guys I told you came in for killing a girl, they got to be buddy-buddy with the warden, and the warden would occasionally take them out at night, and have a few drinks with them. And the assistant

warden didn't like it, was angry, was jealous. I was jealous, 'cause he wouldn't take me, and I was number one. [laughing]. But, I don't know how the word got to the governor's office, but one night, the warden took these two guys out, they were having a few beers, and they came back to campus, there were some state troopers there. And, he packed his bags [laughing], the warden was gone.

JR: He got fired.

AE: He got fired on the spot. So, back at that time, they had a state law that you could not be paroled unless you had a job waiting for you on the outside. I didn't have a job waiting for me on the outside. I was paroled to college. And, when I got out in June, even though college didn't start until September, I had already been readmitted to UK. So, I went back to the University of Kentucky.

##### **5) Political Organizing, Strategy, and Participation: The Communist Party**

**Mr. Evans was very much involved in African American student activities during his time at the University of Kentucky. He became president of the Black student union among many other things. What main organization did he become a member of? Why did he join? Where did this participation lead him? Why did he resign?**

AE: I would be doing research, and organizing. Organizing the community to go to protests and rallies, researching the back[ground], going to visit with these

inmates. Everybody I mentioned, I went to visit, except for {George Merrick}, on death row, and interviewed them, as a reporter.

At the time I was writing for The Daily World, which is a Communist Party Newspaper in America. I joined the CP USA in, I think, [19]75, [19]76. After being a part of the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression, (office noises in background) many of the members were Communists, including Angela Davis, and as I learned about the history of the Communist Party USA, and its background, I got to meet Gus Hall, I got to meet Henry Winston, who was a legend, and I learned that despite of what American propaganda was saying about it, when it came to human rights and civil rights, the Communists were more advanced than anybody in society. Case in point was the Scottsboro Boys, back in the 1930s. They were arrested for allegedly raping a white girl on the train, and it was clear that these thirteen boys were not guilty. Not even the NAACP would support them. Only the CP USA was there to fight for them and they were on the ground, in Birmingham, in Alabama, organizing in the community, [and] they were, the most instrumental group in the country in saving those guys' lives. Then when I learned that people like Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Dubois, had been members, I was eager and enthusiastic to become a dialectical materialist. And that's what brought me to Texas.

In 1975, the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression sent me to Houston to cover an international woman's convention led by Bella Abzug. And I went to cover it, I was going to write for the Daily World, and organize, also petitioning to put CP USA on the ballot because Hall was running for president, with Angela Davis as--

JR: President of?

AE: The United States. Angela Davis was running for Vice-President. And our job was to collect enough petitions to get them on the ballot. I had petitioned in Alabama, in Georgia, in Tennessee and Kentucky, and then they sent me down here. And, we were petitioning in Houston, and it started to rain. And I don't know if you know much about Houston, [laughing], but, when they get really heavy rains, it can really flood. It flooded so bad that the people I was with, we drove around on the upper deck of Loop 610 for at least four or five hours. We could not get off. There was not one exit that wasn't totally filled with water. So, when, crews finally got the water down enough for us to get out, they decided to send me to Austin, to organize here on the drag. And I worked with some people here who were in CP USA.

And I came here with the intention of staying just two years. I wanted to go to graduate school, applied to UT, was turned down. I was accepted at Texas

Southern, and I went to TSU for a couple years working on a master's degree in sociology. I accumulated thirty-three hours at Texas Southern, but, I was paying my own way, personal loans, and I ran out of money. I did everything but write my thesis, and I came back to Austin having not written my thesis because I was in debt, and got a job working for an insurance company. I stayed involved in the movement. I worked with the Black Citizens Task Force, the Brown Berets, I helped organize against police shootings. I was still a member of the CP USA, in fact, I was the president of the local chapter. And then around 1984, I resigned.

JR: From the CPA?

AE: Yeah. It had been brewing for a couple years. In 1982, when I was in graduate school, I went to some of my CP USA friends and said, look, I'm going to have to drop out of school, all I have to do is write this thesis and I'll have my master's. I can't find any work. You know, I don't mind working, I've been working all my life. This one Hispanic friend of mine who was an organizer for the bus union tried to get me on at his company. Couldn't get me on, but he found that the CP USA from New York had just sent a young white guy down to organize 1099, which was the hospital worker's union. And I had been a very effective organizer for years. I went and applied for that position, which would allow me to complete my master's and stay in school. And he turned me down, because he only wanted white organizers. That's when I began to realize that in

spite of all its progressive ideology, the Communist Party was still composed of people. And communists were as racist as capitalists. I became disillusioned with the party once I was faced with that kind of racism from inside. And I'd also had problems in part because I had always been religious, and they used to laugh at me for praying, but I didn't hide my religion. We'd be having a dinner or a lunch, and I'd have my head bowed, they'd be laughing [laughing]. I didn't care. God was important to me, still is. And so, I got out.