

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

**African American Texans
Oral History Project**

Lightly Transcript

Interviewee: Akwasi Evans

Interviewer: Jodi Relyea

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Transcriber: Jodi Relyea

JR: I'd like to start by asking you a little bit about your childhood. Where did you grow up?

AE: I grew up in Paris, Kentucky.

JR: Paris, Kentucky?

AE: Yes.

JR: What did your parents do?

AE: My parents were not married to one another. My father lived in Dayton, Ohio, so my mother was on welfare. 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 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 because she smoked a lot, drank a lot.

I went to live with my grandmother, and that's when life started to change, because 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 they got too old, they gave her to their daughter, and she became a cook for the daughter's family in town. With my grandmother's help, and I had an aunt also, my mother's 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 because 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.

I didn't meet my father until I was ten years old. I've written about that. In my first book of poetry I wrote a story about that. I decided I wanted to meet this person, because it's important for a young man to identify with his father. I think it's important for a young girl to do the same thing, but there was something in me just compelled me. I had to know who my father was. I had worked for two years on a paper route, from eight years old to ten I saved my money. I got on a bus one day and went to Dayton, Ohio, and went to my aunt's house, who my mother had lived with when she was in Dayton, where I was born. I went, and asked her if I could use the phone, and I went through the phone book and I looked up everybody named Evans. I called and said, "Are you my daddy?" Most of them [laughs] said no. This one guy said, "Who are you?" I told him my name. He said, "Where you from?" I told him. "What's your mother's name?" He said, "Where you at now?" I told him. He said, "I'll be right over." He came over, and that was the beginning of the greatest relationship I've had in my life. He and I became not only father and son, but best friends. I idolized my father. I went to stay with him every summer from then on. He pushed me to excel as well. He was a World War II veteran, who came home and got married, raised a family, got divorced, raised a second family. All in all there are eight of us, by three different women. He was married to two of them. My mother was the one he wasn't married to.

After meeting him, and with the influence of my grandmother, I really started believing that the sky was the limit. Unfortunately, I was still a Negro. That was still during the time of segregation. We went to an all Black school. Until 1963, my sophomore year, and then the schools, well they didn't integrate, they closed our school down, and told us we had to go to the white school. We really didn't want to go. But, since we were there, I took advantage of the opportunities. I

joined the Speech Club, I joined the French and Spanish Club and played basketball, ran track, played baseball, not on the high school team, but played. Graduated with honors, and was one of the two African Americans in my class to go on to college.

Let me back up because 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. 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. I'll never forget, we returned that following Monday, it was on a Friday. We got back and went to school Monday morning. The principle called us all 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. 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?" 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" [laughs]. 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 Frankfurt, 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. 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. 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. That went on for two days, and then the president suspended school. Sent us all home. 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.

I applied for University of Kentucky, which was a white school. There were very few African Americans there. To my surprise I was accepted. I went to UK, and I spent one year there. 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. 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. That went on for a year.

Then I dropped out to get some more money because I was on student loan only. 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. 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." 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.

JR: Okay.

AE: 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. We decided, after we put it out, we'd leave the sheets there. 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. 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." 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. 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.

JR: Their families could?

AE: Yeah, and mine just couldn't. 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. So, in prison, 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.

(minute 14:48)

There were no books on the entire campus. I began to complain about not being able to read. They finally called a book mobile in, and I ordered some books. I kept on ordering books. Finally I convinced the warden to let me start a library.

I started a library. Then I convinced the warden to let me start a school. I started a school, and I taught school. 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. Me, and another inmate that came in. [He] 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 two hard and fast rules: no homosexuality, and no racial fighting. 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. 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 [laughs] and it did. They played, they chose all white against all Black, and the Black guys won. The white guys got mad, started throwing weights at them, and [laughs] 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 racial climate from then on?

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. [laughs] His bunk was across the hall from mine. 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." He started sniffing around, and I said, "Dan, be a man, apologize." I went back up to the day room. Everybody's sitting out there. He come clompin out in big clod-hoppers and walked up to the television set, hit the off knob, turned to us and [said], "I apologize to all the niggers." [laughs] 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 [laughs]. 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 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 19th, 1970. Juneteenth. 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 [laughs]. 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. The assistant warden didn't like it, was angry, was jealous. I was jealous, because he wouldn't take me, and I was number one. [laughs]. 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 [when] they came back to campus, there were some state troopers there. He packed his bags [laughs], the warden was gone.

JR: He got fired.

AE: He got fired on the spot. 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. When I got out in June, even though college didn't start until September, I had already been readmitted to UK. I went back to the University of Kentucky. Got involved politically there, became president of the Black Student Union.

JR: How were you paying tuition?

AE: Student loans. Student loans. And working. I worked as much as I could. In fact when I graduated, I was working on a garbage truck. That's how I earned the money to pay for my last semester.

We were less than one tenth, one percent of the population, we were worse than UT is in terms of population. 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. 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. It was one of the classroom buildings, but it was totally brick and glass, no wood anywhere to be seen [laughs]. 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. [It] allowed us to travel, to go to conferences. [We] went to Indiana to deal with the problem of apartheid in South Africa. [We] went to Chicago to form the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression.

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 went to Charlotte, North Carolina, worked on the Wilmington Ten case, Ben Chavis, the Charlotte Three. I worked on the {George Merrick} case in Alabama. I worked on the {Johnny Moniharris} case in Florida. And was instrumental in helping win all of their freedoms.

JR: What would you be doing in these cases?

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, 1975, 1976. After being a part of the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression, 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 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. 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. 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.

JR: President of?

AE: The United States. Angela Davis was running for Vice-President. 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. We were petitioning in Houston, and it started to rain. I don't know if you know much about Houston, [laughs], 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. I worked with some people here who were in CP USA. So I came to Austin [in] 1975. Like most people, I fell in love with Austin. Austin and Lexington, Kentucky, where the University of Kentucky is, were almost identical, except Austin was bigger and better in every aspect. They both are college towns with a military base right outside, they both have liberal progressive leanings, but Austin was more progressive, Austin's air was cleaner, Austin's water was cleaner, Austin's temperature was better. The last was the most influential factor. I was tired of snow. When I graduated from [the] University of Kentucky, in 1978, I immediately moved to Austin.

JR: You graduated with a bachelor's in?

AE: In sociology. 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. 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[to] 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. 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. 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. 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 [laughs]. I didn't care. God was important to me, still is. So I got out.

(minute 30:37)