Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of SRU
Thomas Gaither Interview
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Gaither Residence, Prospect, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Aveion Levert and Judy Silva
Transcribed by Jared Negley
Proofread and edited by Judy Silva

AL: My name is Aveion Levert; this is Judy Silva.

TG: Pleased to meet both of you.

AL: Today is February 2nd, 2024, and it's the Rock Voices interview at the home [of] and with Dr. Tom Gaither. To get started, can I just get some basic information, like full name, where you're from, upbringing, education, things like that?

TG: Full name: Thomas Walter Gaither is my full name. I was born and raised in Great Falls, South Carolina. I was one of five children. All five of them eventually would earn baccalaureate degrees, there was a PhD and several master's degrees. And the really funny thing about that is when I was growing up, I was really enthralled to find that there was somebody who had a master's degree. I never knew anyone who had a PhD. We of course went to the medical doctors, but they were all White. So, a sense of connectedness to the importance and significance of degrees in my family was essentially nonexistent. And that's to say something because the people around us would have had no idea as to what a master's degree was, or a PhD was. They understood the concept of what the principal of the school was, and he was called a 'fessor, not a professor. *That's the 'fessor over there*. So that was sort of the intellectual milieu in which I was raised.

AL: And then, what was your employment prior to Slippery Rock University?

TG: Immediately prior to Slippery Rock University, I had a couple of months and a half, two and a half months stint as the forester for Iowa City, Iowa. I was the forester because a very tragic disease of American elm trees had started some many, many years previous to my being employed as a forester. And basically, what happened is that the elm trees became diseased, they died, and then they cost a lot of money because people had to pick up these limbs, and cut them off of cars where people had parked on city property. So, the city of Iowa City was having that problem, and my job was to go around and find diseased elm trees, take a spray can and put an X mark on them. And then when I'd worked up about 20 or 25 trees, I would put them out for bids by the tree companies and then we would accept the lowest bid. And they would come in and cut the trees down. They would then take them to this very large bonfire, and they would burn the trees so that killed the parasite to help to slow down the movement of the pest across the country. So that was my connection to forestry.

Now of course as the forester you get calls about what's wrong with this tree or what's wrong with that tree. And there was one memorable one where the lady said, *I bought this tree five*

years ago and it hasn't grown one bit. And I dug down beside it and the dog urine almost knocked me down. [Laughter]. The aroma, the odor. And I said, *You need to retrain your dog. Just stop the dog from using the base of the tree as a receptacle for urine*. [Laughter].

JS: So, was that forestry gig before your PhD?

TG: It was right after my PhD.

JS: Right after, okay. So, we skipped education. Maybe we wanna circle back to . . . education?

AL: Yeah, we can circle back around to that. Definitely.

TG: Okay, I am the product of a one-room school. Schools were not available at the decision of the government of South Carolina. The idea was that Black people couldn't learn, so why would you have schools for them? So, the school that I attended was actually owned by a Methodist church. The church owned the school. They put in the desks and things of that sort, but anything else having to do with the school, including the payment of the teacher, was done by the state of South Carolina. And so that's where I went to school first. My mom was the teacher. She didn't have the money to pay childcare and so forth. So I actually got to start school when I was about four and a half years old, and I had a brother who was even younger than I who started at the same time. And we went all the way through elementary school, high school, and college together. In fact, we were college roommates at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina.

JS: What's his name?

TG: Herman. He eventually became the superintendent of public schools for Buford County, down where Hilton Head is. I visited him about five or six months ago.

So first seven years of education was there. And then we went to the high school, which was called Elizabeth Heights High School in Great Falls. We actually lived on the county line between Fairfield County, which is where I lived, and Chester County. The high school was in Chester County. And so this was, of course, about the time of the Supreme Court's 1954 decision [Brown v. Board of Education]. And so they built rather hastily, in a matter of three or four years, these schools for the newly fused groups that had been previously in smaller schools. They sort of fused them together and we went to the high school. The high school, starting out with eighth grade, had about 85 or 90 people in it. By the time we finished the four-year experience--eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth--by the time we got there, we had 15. So my high school class was 15 people. I was one at the top of the class: I was the valedictorian, my brother was the salutatorian, and we were the only two out of the class that went on to college.

AL: Interesting.

TG: Yes. So when people tell me their class was 500 people, it blows my mind.

JS: Fifteen in your senior class?

TG: Yes, that was the class. They started out with more than that in the class, but what happened is that girls got pregnant, guys decided to go to work and quit school, and that kind of thing. So, sort of their own decision to not continue the educational experience. And in the absence of anybody who had been educated locally that would inspire them, that's even in some sense understandable.

From Elizabeth's Heights High School in Great Falls, South Carolina, I went to Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina where I majored in biology and general science.

JS: How far from home was that?

TG: About 90 miles or so. I did want to get away from home a little bit because I wanted to make my own decisions about what I was doing. I think going to college is more than getting credits and getting a degree, it's also growing up and making your own decisions and finding your own way through life. And I've always thought that that was very, very important.

[Brief aside].

For the next degree I went to Atlanta University. I got the B.S. from Claflin University, then I went to Atlanta University. And my going to Atlanta University was something of interest because I was working full time in the Civil Rights Movement and you could get [military draft] deferments up for a number of years, but at some point you could no longer get deferments. And I was out of deferments. So I actually left the Civil Rights Movement because I had to go to be inducted into the military.

JS: You're talking about the draft for Vietnam. Is that correct?

TG: The draft for Vietnam. Yes. It turns out that the draft for Vietnam tossed me in a situation where I no longer had deferments. So I had to go back to my South Carolina residence for induction into the military. The first day things went well, the sergeant said, *You did very well on the tests*, says, *but do you have an arrest record?* And I said, *I not only have an arrest record, but I've also served time.* And he says, *Well, you're not fit to serve in the military, but if you don't go back to school, we are gonna get you*.

It took me about three or four weeks to reactivate my application to go to graduate school. I went to graduate school at Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Now, in the interim period there, I had been working in the Civil Rights Movement before being required to go into the Army. Then during one of my stints I gave a speech at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and I met one of the influential professors. I expressed to him my interest in going to law school because that was more closely related to what I was doing in the Civil Rights Movement. Unbeknownst to me, he wrote a letter admitting me, or telling his admissions committee to admit me to law school at Wisconsin. But I did not know about this until a year later, after I had worked for one year on my master's degree in biology from Atlanta University.

When I was working at Atlanta University, I was very much influenced by one of the professors who said, *Gaither, you should go on to graduate school. You have what it takes to make a good PhD*. So that's how I wound up at the University of Iowa studying--actually it was botany. But the larger degree or the large umbrella, of course, would be biology. Botany was Iowa's department that I studied in.

JS: And at Atlanta, wasn't something to do with their summer school was starting so you were able to get in there and not go to Vietnam?

TG: Right. The other university that I had on the hopper was the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. But it was just that a session of Atlanta University was starting within a couple of weeks of being told that *I was not fit to serve, but they would get me*. So that's how I wound up going to Atlanta and then eventually to Iowa.

JS: And could you have registered for whatever the term is--as a Conscientious Objector?

TG: I could have registered as a Conscientious Objector. I would have not made a good soldier.

But the thing of it was that I was so busy in the Civil Rights Movement to be a Conscientious Objector (CO)--and I had several friends who were COs. They got alternative ways of serving and showing that they loved their country other than carrying a gun. But I had not completed the requisite philosophical statement that would qualify me as a CO. So I was just gonna go ahead and be inducted into the regular military in the hopes that I could find an assignment there that would permit me to take nonviolent philosophies onto a battlefield and not wind up being killed.

JS: Yeah, crazy challenge there, I think. Wow. We’re gonna talk about that nonviolence, right?

AL: Yeah, I have some questions about that later on. But how did you end up at Slippery Rock and your position, and how many years were you there?

TG: I was at Slippery Rock for 39 years. I was a professor of biology, botany, sometimes more specialized areas, even though my typical teaching assignment was to teach general botany. But those were my all-time favorite courses.

The reason I went to Slippery Rock was because I didn't want to be pigeonholed just as a teacher. I *love* teaching, but I didn't want to be just a teacher. I wanted to contribute in an original way to my chosen area of academic expertise or interest, and you have to have the facilities to do that. Slippery Rock had done the business of looking to purchase a very expensive item of research equipment that’s called an electron microscope. The electron microscope is able to use electrons in a vacuum system that are generated, they pass through a specimen; they get scattered in a way that creates an image of the internal details of the specimen. Slippery Rock was getting one of those microscopes. I had several other offers, but they didn't have an electron microscope. So I came to Slippery Rock because I would be able to--at least during the summer and any other time that I could find the time--I'd be able to continue to do some research in the area of interest that was my fascination.

JS: That's fascinating that that's what brought you to Slippery Rock.

TG: Yes, it was the EM-scope.

AL: Did you still practice forestry while you were at Slippery Rock?

TG: No. No, except if somebody called me up in saying that there was something wrong with [a] plant or a tree [laughs]. I had some of those kinds of calls too, and I always tried to answer those calls because my philosophy was that I was actually being paid by the citizens of the Commonwealth. The specific thing that I was to do was to teach. But teaching can involve more than the students that are before you in the chairs or [at] the desk. It can be your whole interactions with the people around you who are actually the people who pay your salary in some sense.

JS: Yep, that's how we feel in the library faculty: we serve the entire community because we are paid by the state; we're state employees. When you applied to Slippery Rock, did your criminal record come up?

TG: Ah! Criminal record did come up! At that time, if they had enforced the criminal record statute or whatever we want to call it, I would not have been able to be in the employ of the State of Pennsylvania. But while a student at Iowa I had not gotten into anything that caused the chair of the Botany Department to think that I would not be a reliable faculty person who would be committed to whatever the contractual obligation happened to be. So I was able to get in under the rap. Now, of course, that's been expunged since then.

JS: I saw that: 2005.

TG: Yes, this was 1968. So there was still a reason why they could have said, *We won't hire you because you have a record*.

JS: So they knew?

TG: Oh yeah, they knew that I had a record.

JS: Yeah and they knew why though, I'm sure. That's interesting. Sorry.

AL: No, perfectly fine. So, what were your first impressions of [Slippery Rock State College] and how did they change over your time there?

TG: First impressions. It was a state college; it was a normal school. It was best known for training Elementary Ed[ucation] majors and PE [Physical Education] majors. I had people tell me that, *I had never had a PE teacher who didn't come from Slippery Rock* [laughter], the thing that the university was best known for. Of course, it's changed. It's become much more cosmopolitan. When I was hired as a faculty member, I think there may have been one other Black faculty person. There was somebody in Physical Education who went back to Texas. Now after '68, I think '69, there were a number in'69 and '70. Bill Polk came. We started to pick up

more Black faculty.

Black students were also infrequently seen on campus. It was a typical conservative, rural, American college. And I'm sure it has become much more cosmopolitan and much more open with the passing of time. It would have to, I think. I would hope so anyway.

JS: Like the South, some things progress and some things stay the same.

TG: [Laughs] that is true. You get the point of progression, but you also have the agents of the previous neglect who are pulling back, pulling back. And that's pretty much a national phenomenon, really.

JS: Trying to remember the faculty member in Academic Advisement. Reverend Wil . . . what was his last name?

TG: Wil Hadden.

JS: Yes.

TG: Yes, Wil Hadden was from Farrell, I think. He was a pastor of a church. He's deceased now.

JS: I'm sorry.

TG: And his wife is--last I heard she had severe problems with dementia. Wil Hadden, 'Reverend Wil' as he was affectionately called.

JS: They were in the library, that department. So we kind of considered ourselves one group.

TG: Yes.

AL: Okay. Well, were there any activities outside of teaching you were involved in on campus?

TG: One of the really satisfying experiences was being involved with a group that was called the Campus Ministry. This was a throwback to the 1960s when it was thought that what we should be concentrating on was producing good people. And so there was a Campus Ministry position at Slippery Rock, and in 25 years we had two campus ministers. So it was a very stable position. We were in and out with the Catholics, depending on who the Pittsburgh Catholic Dioceses sent to the Newman Center. If they sent someone who was progressive and accepted there may be a way to Heaven other than being a Catholic, we were in good shape. [Laughter]. But otherwise some of the relationships became very strained. And yes, I particularly liked that group.

Now at some point as we got into the late '70s, '80s, it became where the people of particular denominations who put into the common fund that paid the Campus Ministry started questioning, *Well, why am I contributing?* And then, *There won't be any more Methodists or Baptists on the campus. So we've got to hold back our money*. So eventually it got to the point that we just did not have the funds to continue to operate an ecumenical ministry that emphasized service to

students and not service to increasing denominational support by people who were recruited to be Baptists, or Methodist, or whatever.

AL: And so while you were at Slippery Rock, were there any particular hurdles that you had to get past when you were here?

TG: [Laughs]. Well, I think initially there was a hurdle even with the members of my own department, because in order to offer me a competitive salary to come to Slippery Rock, they had to give me an academic title that was commensurate with the salary that the university and the state could pay. In other words, I couldn't have been hired as an assistant professor because that capped out the end of the assistant professor range. But I could be hired as a temporary associate professor, in which case they could offer me the bottom line of the associate range, which would be competitive with the offers that I got from other colleges. Some of the people who were the majority group who were already in the department had been hired under the old system, and they initially didn't like the idea that I had so called *gotten a break* on probably about $1500 or something, we're not talking about a big chunk of money.

That was one of the initial hurdles. And I think the fact that I was in a space that had not been occupied by anybody like me before was in the minds of many of my colleagues a major hurdle. But I think I did earn their respect and was able to function in the department without major difficulties.

JS: Were you in Vincent Science Hall? Was that, had that been built yet?

TG: When I came for my interview, the science building was the old building that became later known as the Strain Behavioral Science Building. And so the first year that I was at Slippery Rock was the first year that they occupied Vincent Science Hall.

AL: Good timing.

TG: I had an office in Vincent Science. My officemate, an interesting person, was a Mormon.

JS: Biologist?

TG: A biologist, yes. He was a taxonomist. He stayed at Slippery Rock for a large part of his career, but he was originally from Oregon, so he moved back to the Pacific Northwest.

JS: But in Vincent there you have not just biologists, but chemists and the geology people were there, right?

TG: Biology was there; Chemistry was there; Geology was there; Physics was there. All of those supporting areas. And I guess eventually Geography may have been there.

JS: Yes, they got merged in with Geology; now that might be changing back again.

TG: Yes, I was curious, the reason somebody said that they were going to put Geography in there was because it started with G [laughs].

JS: G-E-O, they got the first three letters! [Laughs].

TG: [Laughs].

AL: Were there any major accomplishments while you were at Slippery Rock that you can think fondly of?

TG: The two things that I enjoyed a great deal--it's not necessarily that they were directly Slippery Rock--is that I took advantage of two sabbatical leaves. The first two sabbatical leaves I had were to the University of California at Berkeley. The last one I took was the University of North Texas, the University of Texas at Arlington. These were ways that inspired me as a researcher because I could go and use their equipment. Sometimes I learned to use equipment, say, at Berkeley, that they didn't have at Slippery Rock. But I knew about the equipment, so when I came back to Slippery Rock, I would find a way of trying to get that equipment or getting access to it. So it was just a way that invigorated me at strategic times during my long tenure as a teacher. Research is also a part of teaching. You're modeling what it is to do science. And that was, I thought, just a great thing to do. Now, some people didn't take a sabbatical away from campus, but I just found it so invigorating for me, for my family, and for my kids to get away from the confines of Slippery Rock; to go to an entirely different place where there were differences in culture, expectations, and everything else. And that was just a great part of being a part of the campus family, to be able to take a vacation and to do something that really inspired you.

JS: I hadn't thought about your kids. How many children do you have?

TG: Two.

JS: Their experience in Slippery Rock School District. It's a pretty White school. . . .

TG: Yes, it was funny because when they got to California, they would come home, they would want to tell me about some of their playmates and they didn't know the difference between a White person, an Asian or anything. So they would say *the plain people like we have at home* or something. That was not in a negative way or fashion, it's just that they did not have in their repertoire the labels for the way that we would normally be able to distinguish and make somebody know who we're talking about.

JS: Hmm, *the plain people*.

TG: *The plain people*, they would call them.

JS: That was a good experience for them . . .

TG: Oh, it was a great experience for them.

AL: Interesting. So currently at the school there is a scholarship in your name and I was wondering if you had a hand in establishing the scholarship, or did that occur after you left?

TG: It occurred after I had left. I discovered it [laughs], but I did not put up the initial amount of money to support the scholarship. It was purely the idea of a former student of mine who went on to get her PhD and her MD from the University of Pittsburgh and spent a long career working--at least half her career she worked at the Magee-Women's Hospital. She was the one who funded the scholarship initially. What we have now are two scholarships: one is for student activism and so forth; the other one is for a biology major. But it was purely a former student of mine who did that. I'm highly honored and indebted to her for doing that because she did not consult with me and say, *Would you like a scholarship in your name?* She did it of her own volition.

AL: That's really sweet. So you were a major influence on her.

JS: [Are there] other students like that you want to talk about?

TG: There's one more student I'd like to talk about, who I think is at Rochester University at the moment. I was for a while the chair of the department graduate committee, so I often got communication, graduate departments in various parts of the country. I got one once from the University of Texas at Galveston. And I said to one of my very bright students, *This would be a good experience for you for the summer. I'll call and try to break the ice for you. You go ahead and make the application.* So things worked out for us. He went to the University of Texas at Galveston, and he was working in a laboratory for someone, and it turned out that he was actually the student assistant, or student overseer of a number of other students who were from much larger, much more distinguished universities. He actually did that for two years, and then he said that he was interested in going to medical school. So, he did apply to medical school, but he wanted to get an MD and a PhD. They told him, *We have a program, but it's for residents of the state of Texas only, and the number of slots in the entering medical class for people who want a PhD also is limited*. And I said, *Well, you know, they obviously care about you. Try again*. He did. And they opened a slot for him in the medical class so that he got a PhD and an MD.

There are a number of those kinds of situations. I had one student who is a retired research scientist. He worked initially for Upjohn, and then he went to Eli Lilly and he just retired maybe four or five years ago. He was a student that I was taking on a field trip once, and we were going down West Water Street in Slippery Rock, and there was an old barn there with hay in it and so forth. I was interested in studying the group of organisms that very often occurred on hay or on straw. And I said, *Just a lark, Tom, go out and get a piece of straw*. So he did, and he put it in a chamber where it was moist and within a matter of a few weeks he came across this little organism that appeared, which was predictable because I had chosen a good habitat for the beginning organism to grow. Well, it turns out that he asked me what the organism was. I said, *Well, I think it's this, but I have a friend who is in Texas who's an expert on putting names on things.* So we sent it to that person and they said, *Well, it's new to science*, so we started working it up for publication.

We did get it ready for publication. But the bad part was that [laughs] somebody in Sweden had done the same thing. And if you look at the priority for continuing reference for an organism, it's the person who publishes it first that gets the claim. The other person just gets to affirm the claim. So we wound up affirming the claim. He went on to get a degree, a PhD, at the University of Florida. And it was one of the really interesting success stories.

I often had students like that, so it wasn't uncommon. We had some very fine students at Slippery Rock. We had some students who had a lot of talent and ability but they didn't want to work. But very often in the Biology Department--there was a culture that required that if you're gonna be top dog as a student goes in the department, you're going to have to work for something. It's not enough to just have talent if you don't have a work ethic.

AL: Yeah, very true. Were there any major influences in your life beforehand?

TG: I would say my major influence in my life was my father. He was an honest, hard-working man. I think, I hope, I got some of that ethic from him. There was also a professor, the professor at Atlanta University, who told me he thought I should continue; name was Lafayette Frederick. I would go to professional meetings all during my career and look around and the one dark face, face of color, that I would always see is Lafayette Frederick. And if you looked around at the students in the room who looked like Lafayette, invariably they were his students. So he was a major influence on me and a major influence on a whole generation of African American students.

[Brief aside between interviewers].

AL: Alright, so what did you do after leaving the university?

TG: After leaving the university, I've been trying to think of what I did. [Laughter]. My wife's health was failing, so I spent an awful lot of time taking care of my wife. Otherwise, much of my time worked into raising and having fun with a particular kind of flower that's called a dahlia. I love dahlias; I usually put in about 125 or so. Those poles that you see--the dahlias get to be very tall and so you tether them to the poles so that they don't fall down on the ground. And my only objective is to appreciate the beauty of the plants. In a typical year I'll give away between 75 and 100 bouquets. I sometimes give them to people that I know. Sometimes I don't know the people, I just give them a bouquet and say have a pleasant day.

AL: That's sweet. [Pause]. Well, so that's all the questions I had on Slippery Rock. So now I want to ask you some questions about your civil rights activism.

TG: You know, I sometimes feel like I've lived two lives [laughter] because it's quite a distance between looking at something on an electron microscope stage and spending time in jail because you refused to get up from a lunch counter in South Carolina. I invested much of my energy in both of those, and I have no regrets about either of the two.

AL: Well, I definitely want to start off with that, since you were a member of the Friendship Nine and that helped spark the *Jail without Bail* [movement].

TG: Right.

AL: And I wanted to know, how did that change the course of your life and career in general?

TG: Well to me, the Friendship Nine experience was just maybe a little bit more responsibility, because I was the oldest member of that group. So it was reminding the brothers who were involved in the same protest that *This is the philosophy by which we proceed*, and sort of being there to model that philosophy, and to share the day-to-day task of making that philosophy into action based on the theory that we'd already gleaned from Dr. King, from Glenn Smiley, and from Mahatma Gandhi in using the same kinds of tactics and techniques to win the freedom of the Indians from the British.

JS: Nonviolence.

TG: Nonviolence. Nonviolent direct action. The great, great thing about nonviolence, I think, is that it's in some sense a spiritual kind of situation where you win over your opponent. You don't seek to triumph over them. You don't seek to crush them. And for that reason, a lot of people say *That won't work, that won't work*. But the Friendship Nine situation shows that it did work, it's a very nice, strategic example of following the principles of nonviolence, doing what we hope that nonviolence would do, and having what we had hoped for an end to actually come into existence and to have someone say, *I was wrong. I'm changed*. And if that's the way we eventually arrive after social contacts, what a great world it would be.

JS: What's going on in your mind when you're sitting there at the lunch counter and people are pouring coffee over your head or whatever? How do you . . . what are you saying to yourself to not react?

TG: You are saying that *My spirit is stronger; my ability to love is greater than their spirit to hate*. It's not an easy thing to do.

JS: I can't imagine!

TG: But we used to do socio-dramas of actual sit-in situations. What behavior from the standpoint of protecting your head would be required, and so forth and so on. And while you're doing the protective kinds of things you said, nobody wants to be maimed because they are exercising a constitutional or a God-given right. But if you have to, you pray for that person. That's hard to even say: you pray for a person who is intent on doing you bodily harm.

JS: That's powerful. I know a lot of people were--I mean, just reading some of the stories in there with the fire hoses and all that, and other protests.

TG: Yes, the Friendship Nine protest was January 31st, 1961. The sit-ins started February 1st, 1960. You heard the song?

JS: No, I don't know the song.

TG: [Singing] *The time was 1960, the place the USA. That February first was a history-making day. From Greensboro all across the land the news spread far and wide, that quietly but bravely, you took a giant stride. People call Americans along, side by equal side, brothers sit in dignity, oh and sisters sit in pride.*

That's how I remember February 1st, by that song.

JS: Wow! That's wonderful.

AL: That's amazing. And so those methods that you were talking about for nonviolence, when you were working at the Congress of Racial Equality, you were teaching people how to do that?

TG: How to do those kinds of things, yes. And we didn't have a deep philosophical library from which to draw. There was a little pamphlet that CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] put out. It was called *CORE Rules for Action*. And so when we first started sit-ins, for example, in Orangeburg, South Carolina. One of the other persons I should have mentioned as a major influence of mine was a man named James T. McCain. It was Jim McCain who brought along to us *CORE Rules for Action*, so we had something to pass out to the myriad students who were to be involved in the sit-in demonstrations in Orangeburg.

AL: Interesting. And you were also in charge of scouting locations for the nonviolent protests?

TG: Okay, yes [laughs]. The modern term 'Freedom Rider' actually came about as a result of a conversation between yours truly and a man named Gordon Kerry. We had been training students in nonviolent tactics and techniques in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and we were on a bus ride from Orangeburg back to New York, which is where the CORE national office was, and we got stranded on the New Jersey Turnpike. The bus actually stopped; we slept on the floor at a Howard Johnson's [restaurant]. Then the next day we went on to New York. During the time that we spent on the bus before sleeping in the Howard Johnson's, we were discussing kinds of projects that might capture the imagination of the country. And that's when the term 'Freedom Ride' first came up. Now, there had been a similar kind of protest effort in 1947, but it was called The Journey of Reconciliation. It went only into North Carolina and Virginia because it was considered to be too dangerous to venture with a nonviolent presentation to Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. That was the FOR [Fellowship of Reconciliation], I think, they were co-sponsors of the Journey of Reconciliation.

JS: That was interesting that they weren't willing to go further south. I thought that was more . . .

TG: Well, it was particularly dangerous.

JS: Yeah. It wasn't safe when *you* did it.

TG: No. No part of being involved, identified as a participant in this movement was safe or was easy. In fact, there's a book by a guy whose last name is Ricks [Thomas E. Ricks], I think, and he likens the strategic organization of the civil rights struggle to a military confrontation. It's a very interesting book--it's something like 'Fighting a Just War' [*Waging a Good War: A Military History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968*]. It looks at the parallels of the way some of the dynamics went behind the scenes in the Civil Rights Movement and how those things played out in actual battlefield things where violent techniques were traditionally used.

JS: And it wasn't just one organization either. I was intrigued by that in your other interview from 2011 about the NAACP and that maybe they wouldn't get involved in certain things. And then there's CORE and there's all these acronyms.

TG: SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]. Yes, people don't talk about the fact that there was competition between the organizations, and so forth and so on. It never really bothered me that much. I think people found out where they could attach on and make the maximum, the maximum bit of change. And that's where they were. It's not the way that I chose to make my contribution. But I certainly can respect somebody who simply says that, *I'm going to sit there and they're going to arrest me and I'm going to make it a test case. And once they say I'm free, I'm going to go exercise the right*. I like the idea of being nonviolently involved, though, because I think when you invest spiritual, human capital, you have a feeling of something that you worked for, that you would not really [easily] give up. If somebody had to say, *Well you can go sit at the lunch counter.* I think the feeling of being able to sit there is different if you fought for it than if somebody just gave it to you.

JS: I imagine so. But to be willing to go to jail and not know what that's going to be like, be in a work gang or whatever, shoveling sand.

TG: Yes, shoveling sand. But the guys were troopers; they did very well with that. And that's asking someone to display a belief in nonviolence that would be beyond the age of these young people. If you were doing it, you would choose, if you had your druthers, to pick people who had a spiritual commitment far beyond the years of these young men. So I think it was a remarkable group of young men and their witness is empowering to all of us.

JS: Is that more related to then the Friendship Nine, in terms of going to jail in the sit-ins? The Freedom Riders, that was, were you going through on busses . . . ?

TG: Yes. The Friendship Nine was centered around a protest where the protesters had agreed in advance that whatever the fine was, they would not pay it. They would serve the time. Now, previous to the Friendship Nine jail-in, it was not uncommon for large numbers of young people to be arrested. They were placed in jail of course. And they would get out of jail and they might go back the next day. But you're putting up bail money to support a system that you're trying to tear down. So it had gotten to the point where strategically something needed to be done, and not paying the bail was a way to force them to have to spend their money to take care of us rather than our paying our money to [laughs] the jailers.

The Freedom Rides were to test what was already the law. I should have been able to travel between states, interstate travel, without being discriminated against with the same kind of ideas that prevailed in local communities for Black people. They'd have to sit in the back of the bus and they couldn't enjoy fresh, fast facilities was the situation all through the South. So the Freedom Rides were to test compliance with the Interstate Commerce Commission ruling that said that there should be no segregation.

Now, you can imagine what the segregated stations looked like. Typically, there'd be: *Colored* was the term that covered both Black males and females. They had to use the same restroom. Then there would be a restroom for White ladies and White gentlemen. And there were even separate places where you sit down in the bus station. The Black people would have to sit one place, the White people would have to sit another. And very often the Black waiting room was downstairs, the White one was upstairs. There were even cases where there were separate windows to buy your tickets from. There was a White one at the top and the Black one was on the second floor.

JS: What about Native Americans? How did they deal . . . ?

TG: Native American would have been considered Black then. Now, if you were of dark complexion and you could fake and an accent as if you were an African, sometimes these guys could do remarkable things because it was at a time when we were very sensitive to some of the emerging African republics, and we didn't want to get on their wrong side. So, if I could fake an accent, it sounded like a Ghanian or Nigerian [laughter], I might be able to go right in where somebody else who looks like me would have been immediately arrested and prosecuted.

AL: Oh, wow.

TG: It made no sense. It was a senseless system.

JS: I think I saw a story about you sitting in the front of the bus and getting asked to get off the bus?

TG: Let's see. Well, once I had been to the NAACP National Convention in Saint Paul--Minneapolis, and I got back to Columbia, South Carolina, and I was going to get a ticket to go to my hometown, which was about 45 miles away. So I purchased my ticket; bus driver got on, there was one passenger on the bus, and that was me. And I was--I didn't get the first seat, I was on the second seat, which was still in the White area. Bus driver gets on and he says, *You have to move to the back*. And being inspired as I was by that convention, there was just no way I was going to go to the back of the bus to ride home. So I just simply didn't press the issue at that point at all. I called a friend who [laughs] gave me a ride home.

AL: Interesting. [Pause]. Well, over the entire course of your life, you met a lot of famous figures, like Dr. King and Medgar [Evers] . . . and John Lewis and Ralph Abernathy. I was wondering, do you have any stories of how you interacted with them, first impressions, things like that?

TG: First impressions of Dr. King: the first time I met Dr. King was in Montgomery, Alabama. It was at a time when the city of Montgomery was under martial law. And I looked from walking down toward Ralph Abernathy's home, and there was Dr. King and his usual entourage of people who went along with him. And that was the first time I met him.

Now, I actually lived in Ralph Abernathy's house. I remember even cooking breakfast for some of the Freedom Riders who were gonna go later in that day to Jackson, Mississippi. I got to know Ralph Abernathy very, very well because I actually lived in his house for about three or four weeks. Dr. King, I knew well, but not as well as Abernathy. I mean, I could get on the phone and call Ralph and discuss and talk about things, routinely.

And John Lewis was an original Freedom Rider. So he was one of the Nashville students who was, well, legendary. I don't need to say very much about him. I remember once going to Atlanta and getting on to an airplane and I saw John and we waved at each other. *We have to get together*. I don't think we ever got together after that, but we knew each other just sort of in passing.

And Medgar Evers had an office just about a half a block down the street from where the office was that I worked in when I worked for CORE as the coordinator of Freedom Rides coming through Jackson. A remarkably cordial, likable, outgoing guy. He was one that I knew very well. In fact, the first time I went to Jackson, Mississippi, to work on making sure that the amenities and hospitality and so forth and housing arrangements were available for Freedom Riders, the only person I knew in Jackson at the time was Medgar Evers. And I had met him when I was the president of the youth chapter of the NAACP from Claflin at regional meetings of NAACP, youth people, and regular members. So I knew Medgar quite well.

JS: Do you remember his death?

TG: I do. I remember his death. He was assassinated the night after I left Jackson from being rejected by the Army. I had to leave Jackson to go to Fort Jackson. So, the night I left I got home and the next morning I was listening to the radio and there was this sort of garbled transmission of a message that said somebody had been assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi. And I knew everyone who would have been in Jackson, Mississippi at the time. Well, I was able to get a clear signal, and it was Medgar Evers who had been assassinated.

So, I got on a bus the next day and went back to be a part of the memorial procession from the office of the Jackson Nonviolent Movement to Farish Street which would be in downtown Jackson. I remember that the procession was rather quiet until we got close to downtown Jackson, and then suddenly some younger men appeared with stones and started throwing them at buildings. Luckily, one of the persons that I had gotten to know, John Doar, was a US attorney who had been working in Mississippi, and John Doar was able to get to talk to several of these key young men and tell them that this is probably not the way we want to have Medgar remembered, or it's not the way to go about the struggle that we are engaged in. And so it actually averted what would certainly have been a riot if no one had been there with a cooler head. I didn't know these young men and I had been working in Jackson, but these were high

school students that I had no recognition for, and they just gave John a short bit of time that he made maximum use of, and he kept a race riot from happening.

JS: Wow. That would have been awful. And what about Congressman [Jim] Clyburn?

TG: [Laughs] Congressman Clyburn and I go all the way back to when I first started working in the sit-ins as a student at Claflin. Clyburn was one of the, sort of, second-level persons after we had organized the protest. We may have put a person in charge of a group of X number of people on a particular thoroughfare going into the downtown area and so forth. So Clyburn was one of the persons, and he worked closely with the guy named Chuck McDew.

JS: McDew, I've seen that name.

TG: Yes. Chuck McDew was--he actually was the major person involved in organizing the sit-ins from South Carolina State. So I was the NAACP youth chapter president at Claflin and that's how I got involved at the front of that.

There was one interesting story. To be the person who was in charge of a group of individuals at the demonstration, you had to at least know something about nonviolence, so forth and so on. And so we would have these sessions in the old J.J. Seabrook Gymnasium on the campus of Claflin. Only guys were present because girls had to be in the dormitories by a certain hour in the evening. So I remember once there was a guy who went on to play defensive end for the Los Angeles Rams, and we were talking about nonviolent behavior and a protest. And he said, *I'll come down and defend you boys.* [Laughter]. We had to explain to him, *No, we don't want that kind of defense that you offer*. [More laughter]. *We appreciate your offer, but*. . . [laughs]. I remember doing that at Claflin when we were getting people ready to go and do protests.

JS: I just read Congressman Clyburn's biography and it's all about his political career, very nice and lovely. And at the very end, he says he met his wife in jail after a similar protest.

TG: Yes, the day that his wife would have gotten arrested there probably would have been 300+ people arrested that day. For a long time it was the largest mass arrest of students for a protest before some of the protests in Birmingham where there were a larger number of people involved.

AL: Okay, so the next question I had, and I think you [Judy] would know this one a little bit better. You [Dr. Gaither] had connections to the Justice Department?

JS: No, I was curious when you mentioned something about the FBI or the Justice Department not being very. . . .

TG: You could not trust the FBI. I had one FBI agent that I thought I could trust. And then there was a case that got called before a federal court--I think that the court was being presided over by Judge Mies--and there was a question about whether there had been a conspiracy connected with a particular protest. I had said something to an FBI agent behind the scenes and off the record. And I had thought the FBI agent would not bring it up, but it was in fact, brought up. And it was the basis for my being called on the witness stand. But they didn't get any useful information to

prove a conspiracy. I'm told that legally conspiracies are very hard to prove [laughs]. And the fact that you had [laughter] . . . well back then, I think they may have been more difficult [laughs].

AL: All right. And then I had a question: what are your thoughts on how activism is handled today in the digital age compared to how it was handled back in your time?

TG: Well, I think it's more freewheeling. There are more people involved. I just hope that it is always remembered that if it's going to be productive, it's going to have to be nonviolent. That's my concern, because there are a lot of people out there that would sabotage the whole movement by making it violent. And if it becomes violent, we are in for real, real difficulty. Because once *I kill your brother, your brother kills my brother*, it's going to be a whole generation before we can come around to recognize we are brothers. And I think that's a reason for concern. But the power of large numbers of people protesting peacefully and saying that a particular action is not morally just, or is not good for the society, is tremendous power. I think it's the one way we can express how we feel about something.

AL: Yeah, well that was the end of my questions. Judy, do you have any other questions?

JS: I might!

TG: Okay.

JS: I want to follow up on a few of the things that you say in that 2011 interview. A few things really resonated with me. One, I think you're talking about pushing further south and maybe even to Louisiana, and saying how dangerous that is and you say, *You could lose your life*.

TG: Of course.

JS: You say it very calmly, but it's just, the rest of the time you talk about your parents hoping that everything's going to be fine, and trusting God's going to protect you or whatever. And you don't really--you don't state that. And it just really struck me that that was true every day, all the time you could lose your life.

TG: That is correct. In fact, the book I was talking about, the Ricks book, talks about the psychological impact of being a civil rights worker as opposed to being a soldier who has all of the demons of having seen atrocities and so forth, that occur. I mean, I quite agree. This was not a life that was casual and easygoing because one racist who decided any moment to wipe you off the planet, and you'd be gone.

JS: Do you think that's worse now, or not as bad, or the same?

TG: It is somewhere between as bad and just the same. I think that there are a tremendous number of people now who resort to acts of violence, especially to support political agendas. One has a hard time squaring the mood that they emit with being truly a human passion or inclination. And sometimes, we often think about acts of violence in the past and we think about

the lynchings and so forth and so on. But my goodness, in this current society, we sometimes see policemen doing the same things that the rednecks and the KKK were doing many years ago. And that's frightening.

JS: Yes, it is. I agree. [Pause]. Another quote in that earlier interview that I really like, just something about *shoulder to the plow, this wretched animal of segregation*. Just thought that was really beautiful.

TG: Thank you. Sounds original, I don't know [laughs].

JS: [Laughs]. I wonder too, you had an opportunity to go to law school. It was kind of a moot point because you were already invested in your biology degree. But thinking about people like John Lewis, I don't know if he went to law school.

TG: No, he didn't.

JS: Clyburn. Okay, But they ended up in politics. Oftentimes those are lawyers who end up in politics.

TG: Sure.

JS: Could you see an alternate route that your life might have taken to fight, fight the cause of racial injustice?

TG: I could, but I don't double play those things in my life. Because somebody would say, *Would you have done this? Would you have done that?* I guess it's that old expression, *There's no point in crying over spilled milk.* You take whatever milk you had and make the best of that [laughs].

JS: Could you see yourself in politics?

TG: I could, yes. In fact, I've often thought about the county that I grew up in, Fairfield County. [It] was probably 65% Black. So if I could have appealed to even a small number of those people, I could have gotten myself elected to the legislature of the state of South Carolina. And I've often thought about that, but it would have been an entirely different course than my life finally took. And I don't have any misgivings about what I've done and what I decided to do.

JS: I'm still thinking about your point about what I would call post-traumatic stress syndrome.

TG: Well, this book, you should read Rick's book because--R I C K S. *Fighting the Good War* or something, I think [*Waging a Good War: A Military History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968*]. Because you're under stress every day. And you either learn to live and adjust to the stress or you get to the point you're ineffective as a proponent of what it is that you're trying to do.

JS: Wow. Well, I don't, I don't really have any other questions. Aveion covered everything. Thank you for letting me jump in a hundred times.

TG: [Laughs].

AL: Yeah. There's no problem at all. Well, I would just like to end this with just one more question: do you have any words of wisdom that you would like the Slippery Rock students or community members to know, or how you want to be remembered at Slippery Rock in general?

TG: I would like to be remembered as one who had a sincere interest in the people that I interacted with, the students that I taught. I hope that they think that I did my best by them in terms of preparing them for life. They certainly gave me the opportunity to learn an awful lot about them. Learning is an interactive kind of experience, and it's not an experience that goes from point A to point B and point B is the end. It's something we do all of our lives. And I think keeping that spirit of open curiosity with a passion for justice and fair play is what I would want to be remembered for, and what I would hope that the university would aspire to.

JS: Well said. Thank you so much!

TG: I'll read my little thing here: *Democracy is fragile. It survives only when there is intelligent, informed, honest, and real input.* Real input is important because we can't start a conversation if your point of reference is not relatable to what I want to talk about. *This is a glass of water*. If you decide it's not a glass of water, what are we gonna talk about? And that's where we are!

JS: That's where we are.

TG: We see things and it's obvious what they're saying to us, but we forget what we saw and we declare what we wanted to see. And that puts us at an impasse that's almost impossible to move off of.