March On Milwaukee: More than One Struggle, Oral History Interview Interview conducted by Matt Blessing, Marquette University Archivist Conducted in the Raynor Memorial Libraries, January 22, 2008 Dr. Howard Fuller

Blessing: Today is January 22nd, 2008. My name is Matt Blessing and this is an interview with Dr. Howard Fuller, [of]

Fuller:

Fuller: Well, interestingly enough, at that time my mother wasn't supposed to be working. So I remember whenever Mr. Beckett, The Housing Authority would come by [and] I'd always have to give some excuse about where my mother was. I'm positive he knew that my mother was working because he knew something about the income and my stepfather worked for Armour, which used to be down in the [Menomonee] Valley. My mother, I'll never forget, she worked for it was called KEX. What it was, is back in those days, back in the day, instead of paper towels that you see now in service stations they used to have actual towels, and KEX was the people who provided the towels. My mother worked along with a number of other Black women at KEX. The plant was right at the top of the hill on 6th Street. It was before you got to what was then Walnut. I remember going up there--and I believe my mother suffers from this today-- I remember going up there and these towels would come back from the service station and then they would wash them and then send them through this big drier and then they would

Fuller: Not really. I recall, obviously, when (pause) I remember the first Black family that lived on

Fuller: No, no, actually I started playing basketball when I was in about the 8th grade because I used play baseball. I used to play everything. I really started concentrating on basketball when I got into 8th grade. I went to Lincoln for the 8th grade and then transferred to North [Division High School] when we moved from the project back over on 11th Street. Because we were on the west side of 11th Street we were in the North Division district. If I had been on the east side I would have been in Lincoln's district. Actually I learned how to play at Lapham Park, on the playground.

Blessing: .. pick up games?

Fuller: Well, at the social center. Because they had social centers back then. I played Junior Optimists; that was one of the leagues and actually I still have a photograph in my office of our Junior Optimist team that won the city championship. We represented Lapham Park. I really learned how to play on the playgrounds and in the social centers.

Blessing: The Milwaukee Police Department in an African-American neighborhood? The Police

I got into 8th grade, as far as I knew, I was prepared. And then when I went into high school, the only issue

understood a lot, the world that I was in at that time, was a world of— we were trying to win the state championship. We played on the first team from the City of Milwaukee ever to go to the state tournament. I was having fun. I was going to dances at the Yon Friday nights. We were playing basketball on all the playgrounds. We went to these (pause) you know you could have house parties back then, because nobody was shooting nobody. It's the stuff you would do in high school, and the only intellectual endeavors that I can remember are what I had to learn in order to get a good grade in school. But as far as the reality of current events, either in Milwaukee or in the South, I knew nothing about it. I mean for example, I knew nothing about the Daniel Bell case, and that happened in '58 when I was a senior. I was learning much more about it later.

Blessing: Emmet Till?

Fuller: I remember Emmet Till because, you know, the way that it was publicized, and the open casket and all that. I remember it, but I don't remember how it impacted me, or if it impacted me at all, other than I remember it. I definitely remember Emmet Till.

Blessing: You've always been a voracious reader—or have you, did that come later?

Fuller: I think it started in college, and certainly when I went to graduate school and then as I got more involved in the movement. Then it became clear that I needed to learn more. So then I really just became the type of reader that I am today.

Blessing: I noticed in the Jack Dougherty oral history transcript that Wesley Scott from the Urban League was cited as one of your mentors. Can you give us more background on that relationship, when it started, or his influence?

Fuller: Yeah it started when I was either a freshman or sophomore in high school. Mr. Scott came to the Urban League, and I think he— I'm not clear if by the time I was a freshman or sophomore he was the head of the Urban League, or Mr. Kelly—but Mr. Scott. I was the president of a thing called Tomorrow's Scientists and Technicians, and that was a club of young people created by the Urban League, to get us to go to college and all of that. And you know for some reason I was identified as, you know, a young person who was going to, you know— [to] do something with his life. And so people like Mr. Scott, Dr. Atkinson, and George Nash— all of these people— Mr. and Mrs. Starms, a whole lot of these people, in one way or another, sort of assisted me. And Mr. Scott, was one of those individuals and we remained; well our relationship sort of grew. Whenever I was going to deal with any kind of serious issue I would always talk to him, from the time I was going to make the decision about where to go to college I went into the Urban League and talked with him about that, and then over the years I would always sit down and talk with him. And when I was superintendent [of Milwaukee Public Schools], when I was getting ahead, people like him and Mrs. Starm, they would always sit down with me and kind of talk me through stuff I was engaged in. It was an extremely important relationship in my life.

Blessing: Now the others that you mentioned—Nash and others. Were they small business leaders, were they religious leaders?

Fuller: Dr. Atkinson was a physician and he used to give me jobs around his house. He gave me free medical care. Mr. Starms was I think the head of the Y and Lincoln Gaines, they were all connected to the Y. Mr. Scott was the head of the Urban League. George Nash actually, I met him because he used to be a director on the playground, so he probably worked, he worked for MPS in some way.

Blessing: Were they all African-American?

Fuller: All African-American.

Blessing: Any white teachers or coaches?

Fuller: Yeah, Vic Anderson, our basketball coach. So there's you know Vic Anderson, Mr. Jaffreys, Pete Kennis, they were all white, but they were all coaches and that was how that relationship developed.

Blessing: You graduated from North Division in 1958. You have already spoken [as] to your focus being having fun and your focus on basketball. By the time you're a high school senior, do you remember a presence of the NAACP or the Congress for Racial Equality?

Fuller: No.

Blessing: Any other civil rights organizations in the City of Milwaukee that seemed—

Fuller: No.

Blessing: Do you mind if I ask you, did you attend church regularly, in terms of a minister, was there any semblance of civil rights activism coming from the church that you were connected with?

Fuller: I wasn't connected with a church because I had gone to a Catholic church in, so like Father Matthews, for example, was one, from a faith-based, because I was connected with Catholic Church. So I never had any real connections with the Black ministers.

Blessing: 1954 you started high school at North Division High School. As a former superintendent of MPS, how would you gauge the quality of instruction that you received at North Division?

Fuller: From what I know, you know and again it's great, like when (fro)7(m)-3(I)7(I)7(e)3(r)7t7(s)8(s)8(7(ec38.62 Tm[(n)3

to lose my scholarship.		

point each year in order to keep my scholarship, but what it meant was that if I got hurt, I wasn't going

remember . I'm sure there was a lot of stuff around it, you know for us it was going to Madison and playing for the state championship. We were just high school basketball players.

Blessing: But before basketball practice, you were senior class president.

Fuller: I think actually I was president of the student senate. I think that Kenny Tatum might have been the senior class president. I was in a whole bunch of clubs, and I shared, you know, the president of this, and the leader of that, always various leadership roles.

Blessing: Any school issues that you remember addressing?

Fuller: I don't know, you know, you were the president of student council. What do talk about when you're in high school...whether or not the library books are out—I'm sure it wasn't anything too earth shaking.

Blessing: Well, should we jump ahead to your Carroll [College] years?

Fuller: Sure.

Blessing: What were the biggest challenges?

Fuller: Being the only Black student in the school the first two or three years. You know, it was like how can I put this, kind of weird in terms of how people you know viewed me. I mean some people, I became very dose with. I made life long friends. I got into a fraternity, the "jock fraternity," because Heinbuch was in there, Theta Theta Phi, and you know I was named, what was I, chairman of the school spirit month freshman year. I ultimately became the president of the student council. I've actually been the president of student council at every school I've attended. But it was a bittersweet experience. It's not something I would want any of my children to experience. I was seventeen years old and coming from North [Division], and then being out there in Waukesha, essentially by myself. It was, I mean, it was a sweet experience, in the sense that I think I got a lot out of my education at Carroll. But the social experience was not something that I would do again. If I could separate them (pause) if I had to do it all over again, I probably would not have gone to Carroll College, even though I believe I got a great deal out of it.

Blessing: You win the state basketball tournament for North Division, you have some bittersweet experiences at Carroll College. Did it at all influence, did that experience influence you in terms of the importance of North Division, and keeping (the high school) together when you went back to community activism in 1979 and 198?" Was it that experience from 10 years earlier?

Fuller: Yeah, first off, unfortunately we came in second. We lost to Madison East in a game I'll never forget: 62 to 59. Anyway, Pat Richter and I have encountered each other over the years and talked about that. You know, the thing about Carroll, was that it made me understand how important it was to be with Black people. Let me try to explain. I always felt I was in between two worlds when I was out at Carroll, because I remember people saying they didn't understand me, didn't understand why I didn't have a mustache. You know different things about...a cultural experience I brought coming out of

Milwaukee and coming out of North. So I remember trying to figure out how to live there and make it. But then when I would come back home, it was like I'm back home, but I'm not really home in my home now because I'm dealing with that out there, but I'm not really totally there, so I always felt like I was in between two worlds. So when I got ready to go to graduate school, I said I have to go to a place where either there are a lot of Black people in the city or there's a lot of Black

the time I began to listen to Malcolm X because when I first...The first time I saw Malcolm XI was like, I got scared. I mean like "Ah man, what is he saying." But then I began to really listen to him. There was debate between Louis Lomax and Malcolm X and they had one in the afternoon where it was mostly white people and Black people who had jobs that could come in the afternoon. The people there were like fully in support of Louis Lomax. Then that night they had a debate at -----Methodist Church where I also saw King speak. This was working class and that church was packed. These people were clearly with Malcolm. That was a huge turning point for me, in terms of beginning to understand the class aspect and the differences that existed between Black people with money and Black people who didn't have money. Then, as an organizer organizer where was my allegiance going to be? What was going to be the purpose of my work?

Blessing: You were coming back to Milwaukee to visit family in graduate school. And you're moving more to the Malcolm X camp during those years. You had a life time relationship with Mr. Scott. How did the established civil rights leaders in Milwaukee react to a radicalized Howard Fuller?

Fuller: I don't think people had to deal with me in a radical sense until later and after I'd gone down into North Carolina and built a reputation as an organizer, then my work with African Liberation Movement and all that. But the one time I do remember I came back I spoke for a meeting of music and that was the Barbee and I was in the integration wing then because I'd been engaged in this stuff in Cleveland. I remember being asked to speak at some kind of rally for MUSIC [Milwaukee United School Integration Movement]. So that really the only time, during graduate school, when I came back that I interacted in