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An Interview with Ron Current

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

African American Collaborative

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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©African Americans in Las Vegas:
A Collaborative Oral History Project

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2012

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Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Director: Claytee D. White

Project Manager: Barbara Tabach

Transcriber: Kristin Hicks

Interviewers, Editors and Project Assistants: Barbara Tabach, Claytee D. White, Stefani Evans.

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Grant. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *African Americans in Las Vegas: A Collaborative Oral History Project*.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University Nevada Las Vegas

Preface

Ron Current's heart was always in the right place, with respect to social activism and his dedication to empowering the black community in Las Vegas. Inspired by Black Panther Party founders, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, Ron started the Black Panther Party Las Vegas Chapter. He was also the director of public relations for the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression; an organization created to work in tandem with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP, to eliminate racial inequality.

Ron describes the overall atmosphere of the Westside community in Las Vegas during the early days, as chaotic, drug infested, and riddled with daily gang related shootings. He also recalls the historic preservation attempts made by leading members of the Westside community, such as Sarann Knight Preddy. Ron recalls working at the University Medical Center while recruiting for the Black Panther Party Las Vegas Chapter.

This interview demonstrates the power of love. As the founder and leader of the Black Panther Party Las Vegas Chapter, Ron was named one of the most influential blacks in Las Vegas by the Sentinel Voice. He recalls utilizing his hands-on leadership approach towards capacity building and the successful implementation of community mobilization strategies and methods. He was a champion for educational equity, equal access to employment opportunities, and economic equality in Las Vegas, Nevada.

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March 16, 2012
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Claytee D. White

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This is Claytee White and I'm with Mr. Ron Current in the Reading Room at UNLV. It is March 16th, 2012.

So how are you today?

I'm fine. How are you?

Fantastic.

Great.

Could you spell your last name? Do you use Ron or Ronald?

Ron.

Ron. And would you spell your last name for me, please.

C-U-R-R-E-N-T.

Okay, wonderful. So I want to get started by just talking about the Black Panther Party and I want to start by you telling me about that original Black Panther Party that most of us think of when we think of Black Panther Party, Oakland, California.

Yes. The Panthers were founded in '65 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton. Ironically, the name Black Panthers did not originate with Bobby and Huey. There were actually two different Black Panthers. There was one in San Francisco and then the name was actually originated from Louisiana, which was basically I guess you would say a political party that called themselves the Panthers because they wanted to implement a determination like a panther. And so there were two.

Bobby and Huey founded the Panthers on the campus of Berkeley. As I said, there was one other Black Panther Party, which was located in San Francisco. Bobby and Huey had met with these guys in San Francisco. I guess you could call them what I call armchair revolutionaries. That means that they were just individuals who had a group and they basically didn't do anything. So Huey and

Bobby actually wanted that name. It fit perfectly with what they wanted to do. So Huey and Bobby challenged the San Francisco group and said, "Well, two people can't have the name; one of us got to give it up and we're willing to fight for it." I think the San Francisco group understood that these brothers aren't messing around; these brothers are serious, man, and somebody can get hurt up in here. So Bobby and Huey claimed the name. So that started in '65.

Ironically, the name Black Panther Party wasn't all of that title and many times people failed to realize the other part of that name. I think that it's one of the most important parts of the name and that is of self-defense. People, you know, they kind of leave that out I guess to give us a more sinister appeal, which hasn't worked for us over the years. But it was called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

The philosophy of the party was basically based upon political and social gestures. Huey would later say that he was sorry that it had led to so many people getting killed and so many people being arrested because that was never what his aim had been. It was to challenge the political system of which we were pretty much solely excluded from. Remember, the Civil Rights Bill had only been passed a year before the founding of the Panthers. The Voting Rights Bill had passed the year the Panthers were founded. And there was a lot of social gestures going on around this country at that time, most of it being perpetrated by law enforcement who then basically was given a green light to eliminate, not the Panthers. The Panthers, they became the target of law enforcement primarily in 1969. That's when they really stepped up the assaults on the Panthers primarily by way of the COINTEL [counterintelligence] program, which was an arm of the United States Justice Department that was founded to eradicate communism.

So what was it called again?

COINTEL [counterintelligence].

Okay.

That's what that was founded for originally, to seek out communism. I think it worked under McCarthy. He used it. And so they reactivated it roughly around 1960, 1962. By this time King, his public career had been in full swing. He had been in now for about five years. Malcolm was about the same. Malcolm started in '54. King started in '55 with the Montgomery bus boycott. So the aim of COINTEL program by way of J. Edgar Hoover was to eradicate any black messiahs. So by the time Malcolm had been assassinated and then Dr. King assassinated, the biggest threat in J. Edgar Hoover's opinion, who we know what he was, was the Panthers. So it was open season.

Now, you've got to remember these were young people, man. These were college kids, some people as young as 13, 14 years old. But Huey put in place social programs that are still used today. The Panthers just aren't given any credit for them. Your Head Start program, that's basically the Panthers because they had the breakfast programs, the lunch programs, the medical programs. All of this was free.

Huey was brilliant in his way of seeing how the system portrayed us as a light of a bunch of just "sorry, don't want to do nothing" blacks. Our children weren't smart because they were lazy. Well, they weren't lazy. They were hungry. So Huey started the breakfast programs. Through research we found that that worked because these kids now, it's hard to concentrate when your stomach is growling. So they did that.

Well, the other thing was that people in the black community really didn't have access to medical care. So he provided free medical care. They had trucks and stuff there and they had doctors that he had gotten aboard this project.

That even made the Panthers even more dangerous. It was better if they were going to be the violent, objective individuals. It was better if it was like that. But they weren't. They were individuals

who really cared about the community, who really cared about the kids.

So was it a mistake for them kind of in the beginning to take those photographs with the rifles?

I think that Huey wanted to send a message. The police were out of control particularly in the black community. I mean there was known cases of abuse of black women, of women that were picked up by the police and then taken somewhere, raped. There were issues of black men just being beat by law enforcement. And I think that what Huey intended to do was to show that's over; we're not going to take that anymore and we have a constitutional right to bear arms and to protect ourselves. Now, Malcolm said that years prior that you have this right and we need to form rifle clubs. Well, Huey literally did it. He was within the law. But to have young radical blacks with weapons that scared people and it challenged the power structure.

So no, I don't think that it was a mistake. I think Huey felt that it may have been a mistake. I don't think it was a mistake. I think it was sending a message.

So what do you personally think, with your experience now looking back, what do you think of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale?

Two very courageous young men. Two very socially conscious and sensitive young men towards their people and sensitive to the real social oppression that our people faced at that time.

Do you remember the song that you and Bobby wrote and sang?

No. Oh, something about—it's been a long time. I forgot. I heard it the other day. I was just kind of sitting there, kind of listening to it. I said, "Wow," you know. I said, "It don't sound as good as if Teddy Pendergrass would have sung it." But, you know, he made his point. "*The revolution is coming. The revolution is coming.*" Something about the revolution.

Okay, good. If you remember let me know.

If you had the opportunity right now—one of the first women that you talked about in

the book is Debbie—what would you say to Debbie today?

I'm sorry. Because I have tried to look her up on Facebook. I know she's just as gorgeous as she was.

Yes. So tell me about the first time you came to Las Vegas and what that Black Panther Party operation was all about. Tell me how it came together. Just tell me all your memories about that first time in Las Vegas and that part of the work.

When I got here there was, again, abuse by law enforcement, Metropolitan Police Department. It was so many so-called justified homicides that a white guy wrote a book about it called *Sin City*. He listed all of the people that had been shot justifiably. The NAACP then under Jesse Scott was functioning and the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression under Dr. James Tate, who is still at UMC. And then something happened in regards to the Nation of Islam. One of Malcolm's biggest problems with the Nation was that they didn't do anything unless you were a member of the Nation. They brought in Minister Duke Muhammad, who is still the present minister. He had the authority now to get involved. So we had the National Alliance, the NAACP, and I at the time was working as the director of public relations for the National Alliance. Something happened. I called a forum and I got the mayor there, which at the time was Jan Jones. Yvonne Gates was another one.

Now, this was the first time. Jan Jones was the mayor the first time you were here?

Yes, she was mayor. She had just been elected. Frank had been elected right under her.

Give Frank's last name.

Hawkins. He used to play for Oakland Raiders.

So I called a meeting and I didn't make it. I didn't make the forum.

Do you want to tell me why you didn't make it?

I was high. Huey and I suffered from the same problem. We had all the best intentions. Apparently

we were pretty good at it, but we had this problem. So I had gotten high that night and I didn't show up. But apparently the forum was a success.

So the next day another meeting was called of community organizations because another young man had been shot. So I attended the meeting along with Doc Tate. So there was talk, what were we going to do, you know. And I had really grown kind of tired of attending meetings.

But this was just the beginning, though, right?

Yes. Yes. Attending meetings. But anyway, I attended. So I said, "Okay, well, let's have a forum." That worked for me. So I said, "Let's do that." Everybody said, "Well, okay, let's do that." Because the other forum had been a success. The idea was to bring attention to this and to allow the police to know that we were meeting on this issue.

So after the meeting Doc Tate said, "Look, Ron, in the future I need for you to talk to me and the board about any forums." That just wasn't me, man. I just said, "Ah no, man, you're trying to take away the niche that I have."

So I went home that night and I thought about it and I said, "You know, we need an organization here that people respected to the point of fear." I thought and I thought and I said, "Well, it's only one group." And I said, "That's the Panthers." So I called Oakland and I said, "Hey look, I want to do a chapter here." Some white girl answered the phone and said, "Well, we're actually underground now."

Because this was which year?

This was 1990. She said, "Well, we're underground now." I said, "What does that mean? How are you going to do any good underground?"

So I called Bobby in Philadelphia and I said, "Bobby man, look, this is what I want to do." He says, "Go for it, man." He said, "Just be careful." he said, "Because they're going to get you."

So what was Bobby's status at that point?

I guess you could say Bobby had retired. He was at the time running a barbeque place in Philadelphia. So I called him and I told him what I wanted to do. He said, "I can dig it, man." He said, "Go for it." He said, "Just be careful, Ron."

So I did some kind of crazy stuff. I held a press conference, said that that's what I was going to do and said, "Okay, I'm looking for recruits." At the time I was working over at UMC medical center. I gave out both numbers. I mean it took a lot of nerve. I mean people over there thought I had more nerve. I gave out the hospital number, you know.

So the next day I get a call on the loud speaker. They said, "Ron, you've got a phone call, you know." So I answered the phone. He said, "Yes, is this brother Ron?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, my name is George Reed and I'm interested in joining the Panthers." So I said, "All right, man." I said, "Do you know where the lobby is of UMC?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Meet me there."

And 'Big George' was my first recruit, who would become my—actually George worked—would be the chief of staff. But he was more than that. He was my friend and you couldn't ask for a more loyal follower. And his reasons for wanting to be in the Panthers was that his uncles at one time were in the Panthers in Oakland. He was from California himself. He was from L.A. and he was a gangbanger. He was in the Crips. So I could identify with that. So was I. So I said, "All right."

And from there it just snowballed. I mean I started getting so many calls. The hospital administrator said, "Ron," he said, "we know what you're doing." He said, "Can you get the calls somewhere else?" I said, "No, man," I said, "this is working too good." So that's how they would contact me because I don't even think we had cell phones then. Oh, yes, we had those great big ones that looked like, you know. So that's where it started and it just snowballed from there.

We basically needed a mission. We needed a mission. We needed something to do to establish

ourselves in the way that I felt that we needed to establish ourselves. I had been watching TV. And there was a new development, which was called Sunrise Mountain. These were new homes being built, but was in an area where you had the trailer parks, like folks with the trailer parks and all of that. So apparently there had been black children out there who were being harassed and in some cases physically abused by these guys that apparently were skinheads or Nazis or whatever they call themselves. So I kind of watched that and I said, "That's it."

So who were the new people moving into the Sunrise neighborhood?

Upper middle-class blacks with some whites.

And those were the kids that were being harassed?

Right. But not only were these guys harassing the black kids, they were harassing the white kids, too.

This is where I wanted to stay as close to Huey and Bobby's philosophy as I could. See, the Black Panther Party was not only concerned with black folks, particularly black folks but not only black folks. They were concerned about oppression, period; that they understood that all of us because of our economic status, because of where we lived, because of the way we thought, we all would suffer the same way. And we were. And these Nazis or whatever they were emphasized that better than anybody could have. And so they had it on the news, you know, the swastikas they were showing at the little bus stops where the kids caught the bus. So finally I got the kid's father's number. I forgot what the kid's name was. I told him—

So these were the kids who were the most prominent ones or the ones who spoke up?

No. These were young kids.

So when you say you got—so you got all the parents' phone numbers?

No. I got the one kid's number because I think that his father had been the one to speak out against what was happening.

Good. That's what I meant. Okay.

But he just didn't know what to do. So I got his number and I called him. I said, "Look, the Panthers are at your service if you need us." And so the father was very law abiding and he said, "Well, let me see if the police will do anything about this." A couple days later he called back. He said, "Look, man, what can you guys do to help me?"

So we held a press conference. And I used the press. I constantly used the press because I wanted the people to understand what we were doing and why we were doing it and if you could tell me why it was wrong, speak up. But nobody ever did. So we held a press conference and we said, "Okay, we will be out at Sunrise Mountain at 12 noon." That's my favorite time.

High noon.

High noon. It's from the movie "High Noon." So I said, "We will be out there at high noon." It was on a Saturday. Now, we had weapons. We did take weapons out. Tony, who became the minister of defense, was an ex-Vietnam vet. So he had tons of guns. But we decided to leave the guns in the van because we could always go back and get them. So 12 noon we went out there.

Now, as I think about it everybody knew we were coming. The media, everybody knew we were coming. As I think about it today I never recall seeing one person walking around out there. It was like everybody knew we were coming. Everybody stayed in.

So we went up to the 7-Eleven. It was at the corner of Sunset and something because this is where these guys hung out. They weren't there. We asked the clerk. They said, "Yes, well, they normally come up here, but they're not here today." So we decided to go to the recreation center because they said that that's another place that they kind of hung out, controlled that. We were on the way there and we got to right past the 7-Eleven and there is a hill because they were still kind of grading stuff for the developments and stuff and there was a hill and police came from everywhere. I mean if you can

ever remember the old John Ford movies, man, with the Apaches surrounding everybody, this is the way that they looked.

We had about 15 of us that went out there that day. Tony had taught the guys, you know, protect the champ. So they surrounded me. I think the guy was like a commander or something of Metro. He said, "Well, I need to speak to Mr. Current." So the brothers parted, let him in and then closed it, you know. I was very proud of them because they had this down. So he said, "Look, Mr. Current," he said, "we have one of the guys who was supposed to be the leader and we have a warrant out for the other guy." He said, "Can you leave and just let us do our job?" And my question was why did it take us to have to come out here for you to do your job?

So was the media there?

They didn't show up, but they heard about it and it was all across the news. By the next day everybody knew.

So they got the guys. We left. At the time the Sentinel Voice, which is the black newspaper, was owned by the Brown family. It's an entirely different type of paper now. But they really had their finger on the pulse of what was happening in the community and they ran it. They had stories on it and all of that.

I remember the West Las Vegas Library used to be our hangout and I remember going up there. And the sisters, Deborah Jackson who worked for the library, she was also part of a group called Wake Up who fights for the kids. She walked in and she said, "Go on, brother." She said, "About time we had somebody." And that made me feel so good that, one, we could be looked upon by the community as someone they could count on and, two, that we had done something that was obviously right because nobody could challenge what we had done. Nobody could say, "Ah, man, that's the wrong thing." I'm sure that there were people who were sitting back somewhere saying it

and I'm sure they were black. But they talked about Dr. King, you know. But we had done something and we had made a difference. And that was the greatest thing to me because I had never made much of a difference in my life. You just don't know how that makes you feel to know that you did something for someone else just because it was the right thing to do.

Did you save your newspaper clippings from this period?

Yes. I got a whole stack of them. I can't even close my drawer.

Fantastic. The day when the 15 of you went out to Sunrise Mountain, how were you dressed?

In black berets, black jeans, you know, the general Panther look.

Before we go on to talk about some of the other things you did once the group was formed, tell me more about Dr. Tate.

Brilliant. He was a brilliant man. I still love that brother. I saw him recently on an ER. You know, they do that ER thing where they go into hospitals and show you what they're doing and he was on there. He was featured. I mean this man had such courage because even at this date—and this is 2012—he was saying exactly what was going on inside UMC. He said, "Well, most of these people look at these black gang members that come in and they don't do all that they could do for them." He said, "I don't see them like that." He said, "I see them as a human being." At the close of the show he had on his dashiki, got into his Desert Storm car or whatever they call those cars, and he looked at the camera and he said, "The struggle continues."

But at the time Dr. Tate was entrenched in a fight to get a civilian review board of the Metropolitan Police Department. He eventually got that, but it was so watered down. He didn't even serve on that committee. It was so watered down that obviously with the shootings back the way they used to be it didn't do any good. But he was a brilliant, very courageous man who was totally unlike any black doctor that you would probably meet. You would think that this guy was an activist off the

street. You wouldn't think that this guy was one of the best trauma surgeons in the country, you know. He used to do an article in the Sentinel Voice. He was always on KCEP at the time.

Even KCEP was a different format than it is today. Today, I don't know what it is. But then you had D.B., who was our minister of information. He was like the morning guy. They just had a bunch of personalities on that station and they talked about what was going on in the community. They basically didn't give the powers-to-be a break.

And you don't see that happening today?

No.

Okay. Okay.

No. I mean that's why they are back with the Justice Department investigating the Metropolitan Police Department.

Is Dr. Tate still here in the city?

Yes. He works at UMC.

Good. I'm going to find him.

I'd like for you now to go ahead. You had finished telling me about the incident with the Sunrise Mountain. What were the other memorable issues, involvements during that time that you were in Las Vegas?

The other issue came up with there was the death of a Jewish kid up in front of McDonalds on, I want to say, Spring Mountain. That's where he was stomped to death. He was stomped to death. It was up around here, as a matter of fact. You got a campus on Maryland Parkway.

This is the campus on Maryland Parkway.

Oh, okay. I'm turned around. Okay. You've got some buildings over there on Maryland Parkway that's—

Lots of them.

Yes. That sits across from like a 7-Eleven.

Exactly.

Yes. There's a McDonalds up there.

Exactly.

That's where that boy was killed.

Okay. So we're just on the other side of campus now. The campus has grown so much.

I guess so.

It has. It has grown so much since you were here that now we spread all the way to Swenson and that's the side that you came in on. If you had gone down two more stoplights, you would have been at Maryland Parkway. You would have made a right turn.

Right. That's—

And you would have come to campus the way that you remember.

That's what I remember. That's what you had then.

Okay. So tell me about that.

The boy had been stomped to death. Well, they turned it over to the UNLV campus police. And so the Panthers said, "Well, wait a minute. This didn't happen on campus; it happened off campus. And furthermore, the UNLV campus police, they ain't real police, you know. Why aren't Metro investigating this?" So again, we held another press conference and we said, "Look, we want this thing investigated and we want these people brought to justice." Now, this was a Jewish kid.

So what about the parents of the child?

Never met them. I never met those people. And we said, we want these people brought to justice.

Now, by this time Tony is getting kind of upset because he's saying, "Brother chairman," he said,

"that's a white thing; let the white folks deal with that." I said, "You don't understand, brother." I said, "This is the true philosophy of the Panthers and we were about justice for everybody."

So anyway, we held a press conference and the police went into action. They found the people, you know. So again, you could do nothing but feel good. People probably paid little or no attention to us, but now we were beginning to get a lot of attention, not only by the media but by very powerful people.

Give me an example.

I remember Kathy—I just saw a show on her death—Kathy—she was in the senate. She stepped down and she was going to run for state treasurer. Kathy Augustine.

Oh, okay.

Kathy Augustine called me one day. Shocked the hell out of me. She said, "Ron," she said, "you're doing a good job." She said, "Keep the pressure up." Now, at the time Kathy was going through some hell herself because they were asking for her to step down and they were investigating her. Jan Jones also recognized us. We were dealing with some heavyweight people up on the Strip, Alan Feldman, who was the top dude. But I think that after the Sunrise Mountain what really set us apart was the Steve Wynn issue and the naming of the ships up at Treasure Island.

Tell me that story.

What had happened was the leaders of the school of African philosophy, which at the time was run by a brother—I think he's in Jersey now—named (Kamau) asked for a meeting with the Panthers. By this time nobody even bothered to call anybody else; they just called us. And he said, "Look, man, they are going to name three ships up at the new Treasure Island." Treasure Island had not quite opened. They were getting ready to do the grand opening. He said, "They're going to call them the Sir Francis Drake and the Sir John Hawkins, I think." I said, "Yes, well, you know, that's what they do."

He said, "But do you know who those guys really were?" And I'm saying, "No." He said, "It was slave runners."

So I went home and I looked them up and they were. That's part of what they did was run slaves. So I said, "Well, what do you want to do?" So (Kamau) said, "Man, I think that we need to submit a letter to Steve Wynn and tell him he needs to either change the names of the ships or we're going to protest Treasure Island." And he said, "You know, as a matter of fact, we should just go on up there and start protesting now." I said, "No, brother." I said, "No, man." I said, "Look, just a suggestion, why not submit a letter to Steve Wynn, give him seven days to respond and if he doesn't respond in seven days," I said, "the Panthers, man, will back you."

So we did the letter. The Panthers signed off on it, the school of African philosophy signed off of it. It was sent to Steve Wynn I think a day later, something like that. I saw it on the news. But the media had it. And there was some members of the school of African philosophy already up there. I said, "Oh, man, which one of these guys jumped the gun?" Anyway, I think it was Channel 13, Channel 8, somebody called me and said, "Mr. Current, we'd like to do an interview." And part of the agreement that the Panthers agreed on was that we wouldn't do any media, any media interviews, we wouldn't comment, we wouldn't do anything.

Related to this issue.

Related to this issue until we either heard from Wynn or we didn't hear from him. So I said, "No," I said, "I can't do nothing right now." And they said, "Come on, Mr. Current. Okay, we won't talk about the Wynn issue." So I said, "Well, all right." So any time that I could try to get some publicity in regards to the Panthers I would do it.

At this time our office was right up from the Nation of Islam's mosque number 75. When they were right there on D Street and Jackson, we were on Jackson Street.

Okay. Where were you?

We were midway between D Street and—what is that? What is the name of that club that used to be there?

Town Tavern.

Town Tavern. We was right in the middle of the block. So I told the press, I said, "Okay, I'll meet you over there at our office at three o'clock." At three o'clock the press shows up. They say, "Mr. Current, the Panthers won." I said, "What are you talking about?" They said, "Steve Wynn said he'll change the name of the ship."

Now honestly, do I think that Steve Wynn was scared of the Panthers? I think that Steve Wynn was aggravated by the Panthers. And Steve Wynn was a businessman. And we could disrupt his business. It was one thing for the school of African philosophy to say something. It was another thing for the Panthers to say something. The Panthers scared people and this is a tourist town. So Steve said, "Well, look, do I think these guys would do it? They probably will. Change the names. What's in a name?" And that's what they did. Again, we could only glory in the triumph.

The other issue surrounded the Weed and Seed program.

Okay. Now, that was when you came back?

Yes, this was when I came back because I went to St. George and then I came back.

Exactly. So I want to talk about the first time. Tell me about the day-to-day operations of the office.

Basically I was there. We had two women that joined the Panthers, Jackie and Cynthia.

You don't remember their last names?

No, I don't remember. Jackie married somebody from the Nation. But Jackie and—it's Charlotte.

Charlotte passed away. These were some dedicated sisters, man.

So the mood was to—and we rented the building from Reverend Bennett who gave us a good deal on it. We had security at the door. It was kind of like a fortress. The building was like a fortress. I mean it was brick and it had reinforced doors. I don't know what it used to be before we got it, but it was perfect for us.

So do you have photographs?

Of the building?

Yes.

No. That we don't have.

Any photographs at all from that time period, the activities?

Only the things from the actual events or stuff that we did.

So stuff from the newspapers?

Yes.

Okay. About how many people could you count on as being members of the group, associated with the group? If you wanted to say the number in the party at that time, what would you say?

Okay. I'm going to break a cardinal rule because the rule was never to talk about numbers. But I'll break the cardinal rule because it's so far back.

Good. Yes.

At the time we had at least 60 people at one time. We didn't travel with that many. That was up to Tony and then it fell upon George to make sure that the security was tight for whenever I was supposed to be. But at any given time we could pull in as many as 60.

Were there any other memorable incidents, events during that time period?

You know, it was not only to me to get the respect of white folks, it was also to have the respect of black folks. And we were called on to do security for the Moulin Rouge. This is before it was totally

shut down.

So is this when Sarann Knight Preddy had it?

Right. She's the one that called us. She said, "Look, could you guys come over and handle security because we're having problems; they're smoking weed in the bathroom, they're doing this, you know, fights breaking out." She was at the time trying to get the Moulin Rouge refurbished. So of course, you couldn't have that going on.

So the Panthers took the job. We went in with shotguns. I mean we showed the weapons. And I remember I was sitting by the bathroom and some dude, gangbanger I think, said, "Man, them damn Panthers in here, man", and "shit, man, who do they think they are?" And another brother said, "Man, there's a lot of people that you want to mess with, but they ain't one." And there never was another problem in there. Again, it made me proud to be a member of the Las Vegas Black Panther Party.

Tell me what the general atmosphere of that Westside community was like in your memory during that time. Just take me over there during the day, on the weekend, at night. Just tell me what it was like.

Chaotic, chaotic, but, Ms. White, it was exciting because things were happening. People were speaking up. People were saying "No, you know, we're not going to take this no more." Drugs were coming in big. There were gang-related shootings every day. But there was still an excitement because we were trying to deal with the police. We were trying to deal with trying to get historic sites saved. You know, Marzette and Deborah Jackson were fighting for the kids to make sure that they got what they deserved educationally. Dr. Tate and Mr. Duke, they were joining forces, man, with the Panthers. And I'm sure that Minister Duke and Doc Tate were basically sitting there saying if we could just get this brother to focus, if we could just get him not to do, he keep killing himself, because we were making a difference. But each time it was like—

You were afraid of success.

That's exactly what it was. People would tell me that then and I couldn't understand what they were saying. They'd say, "Man, what are you scared of? Look at you." And I'm sure that it drove Dr. Tate and Minister Duke up the wall because like one day I would be one way and the next day I would be something else. The dedication was there. The love was there. But it was me who was chaotic. So it was to say the least extremely exciting. Dr. Tate and I were named two of the 16 most influential blacks in Las Vegas at that time.

By?

By the Sentinel Voice. You wouldn't see that today.

Okay. Tell me about the employment picture in the black community during that period.

They said they would not hire people with felony records. And so I met with Alan Feldman and I said, "Look," I said, "you're 80 to 90 percent of the employment here in this city." I said, "If you won't hire these guys, what are they going to do? They can't go for 7-Eleven because they're not going to hire them. What are they going to do? You're creating a monster here." Which is exactly what they're doing today, but today they don't have the Panthers to challenge that. So they appointed an individual to make sure that X amount of individuals came out of the Westside to be employed in the casinos.

With criminal records?

With criminal records. With criminal records. Our feelings was if they ain't killed nobody, if they haven't stole anything, and to the point I say even if they stole something, don't give them that job, you know; don't put them in the cage if they stole something, you know. It's just that simple. Give them a janitorial job. But you've got to remember a janitorial job at the casinos pays \$15 an hour. So it was tough, but we were making headway.

We certainly didn't have the level of unemployment that you got today over there. I think that it was so many groups who was white that was saying, "No, no, that's unacceptable, you know, this is what we want." And my thing was always, "Okay, if it's wrong, show me where it's wrong."

In the book you talked about that a person going through the challenge that you were facing at the time couldn't focus on little things like a car and you give an example of that. And then as I'm reading I'm thinking, he's going to all of these meetings, making all of these decisions and statements, but yet he would run his car until it was so hot it was about to catch on fire. So tell me what the thinking is of somebody who was going through what you were going through.

You don't care about yourself. The focus is not on me. The focus is on other people. I think decisions that I made, which I regret today, and things that was offered to me, employment wise and possibly job wise and career wise, I wouldn't do that. I would make another decision because I would be able to think beyond, okay, well, if I do this over here, maybe I can do even more over here. Maybe what they need is someone that they can't push around in the system. But I didn't think like that. And, you know, things that would happen to me, it just didn't matter. I mean, oh, I can get another car. Or, man, I've got to get home because I've got to take this hit, you know. It's insane, man, but that's the way an addict thinks.

You were invited to speak at Dixie [State] College by a Dr. Green.

Yes.

Tell me about that and tell me about Dixie College and tell me who Dr. Green is.

Dr. Green is a professor of, I believe, sociology at Dixie College.

Where is Dixie College?

Dixie College is in St. George, Utah.

Oh, okay.

That's when I left the first time.

So before you tell me that story, then, tell me about your leaving. Tell me why you decided to leave Las Vegas that first time.

I was hurting. I was hurting. And the thing is nobody knew but a couple of people. Now, the soldiers knew. My chief of staff knew. My minister of defense knew. D.B. knew, minister of information. But most people didn't know, man, that I had this serious problem. And I just reached a point where I said, I've got to get out of here. See, what addicts think is that it's not them that has the problem; it's where you are that is the problem. So if I go someplace else, the problem will go away.

And you proved that in the book. You've proved that with your life, the way you've moved around.

Yes. We call them Geographic's, doing Geographic's. So I just—I needed a break. There was too much pressure from the Panthers. People were expecting too much from me.

So how did you say goodbye?

I just met with George and I said, "Man, it's your baby; I'm gone."

And he understood?

He understood, but he was afraid. See, I was the leader. I'm the one that came up with everything. I had the plans. And it all made sense even though I wasn't really at the best. But it made sense. They had found success and now George was going to have to take over and handle it. And he wasn't equipped. George could rule men. He's a big guy and he can control men. But he wasn't an administrator. Neither was Tony, but Tony had left. He had resigned from the Panthers, citing that the Panthers were taking on too many things that dealt with white folks.

And that was his problem all along?

Right. That was Tony's problem. So I turned it over to George and I took off and I went to St. George.

You always fell into such wonderful situations. People trusted you, taking you in their home, giving you jobs. So after being in St. George for a while, did you go back to California? I can't remember right now.

No. I went back to Vegas.

Came back to Vegas and this is—

And the Panthers were falling apart.

Okay. You returned to Vegas. And which year was that?

Ninety-five. Yes, '95.

Okay, yes. So before you come back to Vegas, tell me about Dixie College and Dr. Green.

Ironically, there's only been three black speakers and all of it had to do with Panthers. There was Eldridge Cleaver. There was me and there was this guy Williams who snitched on Fred Hampton and most feel got Fred Hampton killed.

And these are speakers you're talking about at Dixie College?

At Dixie College.

Where did Dixie College get that name?

It is based off of how—the people who founded Dixie, this is the way they felt. They wanted a southern "you don't want to come here."

Gentile.

Yes, yes. You don't want to come here. So I have no idea how Professor Green found out about me.

But anyway, he called me. He said, "Hey, man, hear you're here and hear what you did and would you mind coming over here to speak?" So I said, "Yes." So it was such a big deal that the paper up there did a front page portrait of me. I think that mainly what I said was, "No one wins in a race war."

That was the name of the article. So it said I would be at Dixie College. I didn't think nobody would

show up but maybe a few people. It was standing room only. And that auditorium has to hold six, 700 people. But it was standing room only. I think that what kind of helped the situation as I was getting threats. I was actually getting threats.

Once that newspaper said that you were going to be speaking?

Yes. "No, man, we don't want that nigger stuff up here," and all of this. I was even in a situation where I needed to get my hair cut. So a friend of mine who was Cuban, he had hair like mine. So I said, "Hey, man," I said, "Where are you getting your haircut?" He said, "Oh, man, I go over here to Ray's." And that place is still there.

Anyway, I go over there to get the haircut prior to the engagement. So there's these three rednecks. They're in bib overalls, man, and they're sitting there. So Ray said, "Okay, you're next." So anyway, Ray is talking. He said, "You know, if you come here and you decide to play ball and keep a low profile," he said, "you'll be all right." He said, "But if you come here talking that black stuff," he said, "you know you can get ran up out of here on a rail."

And you are sitting in the chair at this time?

I'm sitting in the chair. Now, of course, I didn't say nothing. I mean you don't say something to a guy with scissors in his hand. So I wait. I don't even make a comment. So he got through and I got up and I looked in the mirror and I said, "Huh, you do a pretty good for a white boy." I said, "Oh, yes." I said, "Let me tell you something." I said, "By running me out of town," I said, "the only thing that you have to think about is which two of y'all not going to go home that night." I said, "You guys have a good day." And I walked out. Never had another problem. But that place was packed.

Okay. So what was it about—this is St. George, am I right?

Right.

What was it about St. George that attracted you? Why would you even think to go to Utah?

A friend of mine, Curtis Collins, he was there for something. I don't know. He used to work there in pathology. Curtis is black. He said, "You know, it's a pretty nice place, man." He said, "It would be a nice place for you to get away for a while, Ron." Because he knew that I was going through problems. And so that's why I went there. It turned out to be an interesting experience.

Good. So go ahead now and tell me about the speech at Dixie College.

So I gave the speech and the speech was entitled "The Roaring 60s, Birth of Black America." And so I took the audience from the beginning of the Klu Klux Klan—how they were founded; that they were never founded as people see them today; it was more of a joke, you know—all the way to the 1960s and the Panthers and how the Panthers got started.

I guess I held their attention because it was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. At the end of the speech a lot of kids, you know, asked questions and made comments. But there was one old redneck dude—got to have one—one redneck dude said, "Ah well, the Panthers, man, was a bunch of communists." Actually, the kids booed him. They actually booed him because that's not true.

Anyway, it ended. It was a great experience.

I remember getting this job working at this retirement home. I was going to do some janitorial work and I needed to make some kind of money to keep going. I remember meeting this little old white lady. Jim, the guy who was my supervisor, said, "Now, Ron," he said, "now, this woman don't mean anything." He said, "As a matter of fact, her favorite person is Jim Brown." But he said, "Don't be offended by what she says."

So I'm waiting. So we go into this day room area where they watch TV. This little old white lady is sitting there looking at TV. So Jim says, "Lanore, this is Ron." And so the lady is trying to look around him because he's standing in front of her and she's trying to look at this program. And then he said it again. So finally she looked up at me and she said, "Are you a nigger?" And Jim said,

"Now, Lanore, now, now, now, we don't use that word, you know, Ron is not that." That's the way she would address me every day, "Hey, nigger." But she really didn't mean it. She was old. Well, she probably did mean it. Yes, she meant it because she was old and she's from that era. But every day she would say that, "Hey, nigger."

And I say, "Man, look, I'm tired of being called a nigger by this woman, man." Sometimes you'd say, "Man, I ought to punch this woman in her head, man." So I said, "What can I do?" So I started—before she could say it, I would say, "Hey, have you talked to Jim Brown?" And it would bring a smile to her face. And she said, "You know Jim Brown?" I said, "Yes." And I do. I do know Jim. I'd say, "Yes." She said, "You know, he was good." I'd say, "He was like a big buck, wasn't he?" So now I'm messing with her.

[Laughing] That's great.

I'd say, "He was like a big buck, huh? Did you dream about him?" I would just taunt her. And so she eventually stopped calling me that because I would taunt her about Jim Brown.

So why did you leave St. George that time?

I finished the book—well, I didn't finish the book. I started the book and I had started writing it by hand.

Now, this is before coming back to Las Vegas I'm talking about.

Right. This is before coming back to Las Vegas. But I was getting calls from members of the Panthers and they were saying, "Brother Chairman, you've got to come back. The Panthers are falling apart." There was a power play between 'Big George' and Tony. Tony had left the Panthers, but now was trying to come back since he knew that I was gone.

I see.

Tony had no more administration skills than George. If it had of been, say, D.B., I could have

understood it.

So now, I'm not familiar with the name D.B. What role did he play?

D.B. was the morning man on KCEP, but he was also our minister of information.

Okay, yes. You said that earlier.

But D.B. kind of stayed pat on it. I think D.B. was staying with George. And so there was this power play that was going on and the organization had split. Part of them was for Tony and part of them was for George. But George was in charge; and, therefore, controlled the Panthers headquarters. So there were groups that wanted to hold different classes there, you know. So George had allowed them to pay a small fee and they could hold their little classes there, you know, one class taught some of the kids in the community on black history. So that's kind of like what was happening. But they said, "Man, you've got to come back because they're falling apart."

That was agonizing because I really wanted the Panthers to be able to exist without me. I really did. I didn't want that responsibility, man. I just didn't. I mean I had a problem and I knew I had a problem and I hadn't solved the problem in St. George. The only thing that I was doing in St. George was coming down here, buying drugs, and going and taking them back up there. But I hadn't solved the problems and I didn't know, Ms. White, whether or not I had the ability to do it again. And so I went back to Vegas.

And before you do that, tell me what your favorite memories are of St. George?

It was quiet. It allowed me to think and nobody knew where I was. I was able to hide. All they knew was that I was a black dude. And at that time there was estimated to be 12 blacks that lived in the city.

So wouldn't that have been a perfect time to get clean?

Yes, if I had wanted to be clean, but I didn't want to be clean. I really didn't. I told myself that that's

what I wanted to do and I told myself that's what I needed to do and I knew within myself that's what I needed to do, but I didn't want to. And so I went back to Vegas.

So 1995?

Right. And I called to Dr. Tate.

Has Dr. Tate forgiven you by this point?

No. No, he still hasn't. But what he told me was, he said, "Ron, the people will forgive you the first time, but they won't do it again." And the people accepted me. I mean they embraced me again, but he had his doubts. He's a doctor, man. Even though he's a surgeon, he's still a doctor. And he had his doubts.

Because he knows what addictions are?

He knows the power of addiction.

Exactly.

So I get back and the first thing that happens is the gang summit.

The first thing you talk about in the book is what I'd like to talk about before the gang summit.

Okay. Okay.

You talk about the Weed and Seed program and I want to know about the connection to that to the Black Panther Party.

The Black Panthers in Vegas did a lot of stuff that historically would not have taken place. We were instrumental in getting Stu Bell [Stewart L. Bell] elected to office. We participated in that. And Stu called me the other day. He's now a judge, but at the time he was a prosecutor and we endorsed him. Panthers had never endorsed any kind of prosecutor or—

Why would you endorse him?

We not only endorsed Stu Bell, we endorsed Jerry Keller. Jerry Keller became the sheriff. So we're

endorsing prosecutors and sheriffs.

So what was the thinking behind that?

I knew, I knew in my heart that these were good men and I knew that they would be fair. And to me that's the only thing that we can ask for. We can't ask for more, but we can ask that people be fair with us. And before them, there was no fairity (sic). The closest thing to being fair was Jan Jones. So I said, "Man, we need to get this guy in office; we need to endorse him. And if we endorse him, then, first of all, it will break all the taboos in regards to the Panthers and I believe in Jerry Keller."

Jerry Keller, you don't hear much about him because he wasn't the sheriff very long. Everything changed when Jerry Keller came into office as sheriff. The abuse by Metro stopped. They used to come past the Panthers' office and wave. I mean their whole attitude stopped under Jerry Keller. And then the powers-to-be had to get Keller out of there. So what they did was they had Steve Wynn offer Keller a job and he was paid double or triple as the chief of security for, at the time, the Bellagio. Yes, the Bellagio. And they got him out of there. They made him an offer he couldn't refuse. You know, he had a family.

And Stu Bell was the only prosecutor that I've ever known whose buddies with people that he prosecuted. I mean the individuals that he convicted, they became his friends. It was kind of weird. But they knew, man, that he was doing a job. He didn't make up anything. The facts, just the facts, ma'am. And that's what Stu Bell gave you, just the facts.

But I think that what really made a difference to people was that there was a young man who had been convicted at the age of 14 for manslaughter. At this time he had reached the age of 18. He was an inmate at the prison—you go up 95, whatever Indian—

Indian Springs.

Yes, Indian Springs. He was an inmate. And Doc Tate talked about this young man and he said,

"Man, this boy, man, needs to be gotten out of there." That if we don't get him out, you know, it's going to screw this kid's life up forever. And so we met with Stu Bell and Stu Bell worked with us and we got him out. We got him out. I don't even remember his name. But the last time I heard was that that kid had graduated college. He made a mistake. That's what made Stu Bell—and I knew in my heart that I was doing the right thing by endorsing Stu.

Wow. That's a great story.

And we are friends to this day. Like I said, he called me the other day. He heard I was coming down here. But that's what we did.

Before you start talking about Weed and Seed because I really want to hear about Weed and Seed, in your book—those are two of the most positive things that you had to say about elected officials that I could remember from the book. You seem to have not admired any of the black elected officials. Without having to call any names—you don't have to call names if you don't want to.

Oh, I will.

Okay. But tell me what that was all about and what you believed them to be.

We had Wendell Williams, nine terms in office, nine, when we were doing all this battling. Now, the thing about Wendell, he would speak up. I don't think that Wendell had the support that he needed. And once the Panthers kind of got behind the suggestions that Wendell was making in regards to the library, the completion of the library—because that library of West Las Vegas sat there with the theater part, it sat there for two years half built, just sitting there. Nobody was doing anything. And it was Wendell who said, "Hey, Ron, man, can you guys get behind this because they need to complete this?" But most of these people—but Arberry, he would attend forums. If I called him and said, "Hey, man, I need you to speak at this forum." Arberry would be there, but he didn't do nothing. And he

was head of Ways and Means. That means he was moneyman, you know. And we knew that they didn't live on the Westside. They didn't live on the Westside. They represented the Westside, but they didn't live over there and they were supposed to. But we knew where he and Gates both lived. And Gates, she just didn't give a damn. She just didn't care about those people on the Westside and she would tell you.

We started an organization called the Unity in the Community, which was made up of 26 black organizations. It was the biggest conglomerate of organizations in the history of Las Vegas. It was all black organizations—NAACP, Martin Luther King Committee, Panthers. It was 26 of them. And we were in a meeting with the 26 heads of Unity in the Community and somebody said, “Well, let's call Yvonne and see if we can get her support on this issue.” Yvonne said, “No.” So Tate I think said, “Well, how you expect to get the people's vote if you're not willing to help them?” She said, “I don't care.” She said, “Two-thirds of my constituents are white.”

It was at that point, man, where I said, “Look, that's a lost cause.” And that basically—now, Senator Neal, he was the senator for 25 years.

Thirty-two.

Yes, okay. Yes. He was a good guy and it appeared that he wanted to make a difference, but like Wendell he didn't really have any firepower. He didn't have really any backings and so he just went along because he probably felt that he didn't have nothing else that he could do.

If the Panthers called a forum, they were all there. They were scared not to be. But they just didn't do anything. And the ministers basically—there's an old thing that most people know, the old-timers know back in that time about the ministers being bought—have you heard it?—for a hundred bucks. So you couldn't count on them for nothing.

And you're talking about during the election cycle?

Yes. They were bought.

Well, I grew up in a black community back in North Carolina, so that goes without saying.

Yes. And what you will see is every two years, four years, whatever the cycle is, there they are.

They're sitting up in the front of the church and they say what they need to say, get that vote, and you don't see them again for another two to four years. The only minister that I had respect for was Reverend Haley, who was the pastor of Cavalry over here in North Las Vegas. He had just basically given up. He said, "Ron, man, I tried to help these dudes and get them out of prison and, man, they don't care." He said, "So I'm through with them." Well, he was being honest. But he never allowed a politician to come to his church and say anything. He would say, "Okay, you can come to the church, you know, you can worship, but you can't say nothing." Oh, he was tough. He was tough. He just didn't play it. He said, "You're not going to use my church as some kind of political pastor." He said, "I don't see you all year, every two years, four years, whatever, so you can come, get your church on, but that's all."

So one more question before I get back to the Weed and Seed program. Tell me about the black legal community. Do you remember any of the early—well, this is 1990s. As you were dealing with Stu Bell and all of them, do you remember any of the black attorneys who are now practicing?

Well, I remember a black judge.

Yes, okay.

Judge Gates who was Yvonne Gates' husband.

Okay. So you don't remember Judge Guy?

No.

Okay. So you remember Judge Gates.

Yes, Judge Gates. There's nothing for me to say about him. He was nothing. I mean he would just as soon send your black butt down, in fact, quicker than he would the white boy because that's the way it was.

So tell me about the Weed and Seed program and how the Black Panther Party tied into that.

The Weed and Seed program was a national federal program. They were trying it in different cities as pilot programs in different cities and Las Vegas was one of those cities. Now, the Weed and Seed program was part of President Clinton's—

Administration?

Right. It was one of his administration's babies. Crime bill package [Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act], the crime bill package. See, I don't see Clinton like everybody else sees him.

Okay. So what do you see?

Many people say, oh, he was the first black president and all that. No, not really, because part of that crime bill package dealt with three blacks couldn't stand together. So if you were up on a block and two of your girlfriends came over there that would be illegal. So that was part of that crime bill package.

So you probably looked at this closer than anyone else.

Huh?

You looked at it closer than—

Oh, yes, I looked at it, I looked at the wording, I looked at the funding, all of that. So we were not opposed to the Weed and Seed program because it dealt with getting undesirables—and we got them just like any other community—getting undesirables off the street. At that time the gangs were at the height. There were shootings going on every day. And so the Weed and Seed program was designed to get these street organizations and these gangsters off the street. So we was for to get the bad guy.

Okay. To weed them out.

Yes, weed them out. Seed was to implement prosperity and growth, jobs, redevelopment, refurbishing of different things. Problem: Weeding was 75 percent of funding; seeding was only 25 percent of the funding. And under the Clinton crime bill package, law enforcement across the country had already received a healthy boost financially of money. So my feelings was, okay, I can support what you're doing, I understand what you're doing, I said, but we need some seeding money over here, man. Twenty-five percent, man, that's not going to get it.

So now, apparently Jan Jones's administration got hold to the fact, well, you know, Ron, man, says that it's not something that he would completely rule out. So one day I get a call. And I forgot what the girl's name is. She's a little cute red-head girl that worked for Jones's administration. And she said, "Hey, Mr. Current, could we meet?" I said, "Yes, about what?" She said, "Well, there's some people who want to meet with you in regards to the Weed and Seed." I said, "Yes, okay."

So we met over at West Las Vegas Library. That's where we met. That's where all the meetings were held. So I walk in and she's sitting there with two white guys. I knew they were cops. I knew they were something that had to do with law enforcement and they were representatives of the United States Justice Department. So we talked. So I said, "Well, what is it that you want from me?" They said, "Well, we understand that you're not opposed to Weed and Seed program." I said, "Yes, but I ain't all for it either." They said, "Well, you know, maybe we can work something out." So I said, "Well, what do you want?" They said, "Well, we want to offer you the assistant director of the Weed and Seed program." I said, "Well, who is going to get the director?" And they said this dude Franklin. Franklin has passed away, but he's still a jerk.

Is Franklin black or white?

He's black. He was one of the clicks, what we call the click. He was always over there at that

neighborhood service office and that's where all the politicians had an office. And we frequented over there because we knew we could find them over there. And so they said, "Well, Franklin will take the directorship." They said, "Do you know him?" I said, "Yes, I know him." They said, "Well, what do you think of him?" I said, "I don't think anything of him." I said, "You can't pick nobody better than that?" They said, "Well, you know, if you get the assistant, you know, you probably can make some decisions that we would probably support you on."

So I knew that I should take it. I knew it. I knew it, man. As I was sitting there, I knew it. And I said, man, you won't get a better opportunity than this, and I'm thinking this. But I said, "Well, do I have to step down as head of the Panthers?" And they said, "We'd like for you to." That's where I started to doubt. I said, well, man, they're going to think I sold them out. I said, "Well, can you give 24 hours?" They said, "Sure." So I left.

I didn't even walk in the house good—no—I didn't even get to the office good, the phone is ringing off the hook. First one is Beatrice Turner. You know who that is? Beatrice, she's interesting. She was a community activist. She's the one that really brought down Yvonne Gates and she was paid off by Ellerman to do it.

By whom?

Ellerman who owns the Paris, that rich white guy up there, man that got all that money. Yes, that's how she got that house. She don't think we know it, but that's how she got it.

But anyway, Beatrice calls and she says, "Ron, I understand that they're offering you the Weed and Seed position. You know the people going to say you sold them out." I said, oh, man. I said how in the hell do these people find stuff out this fast, you know?

So I knew, Ms. White that I should have took it. I knew I should've took it, but I just couldn't sell the people out, man. I just didn't want that to be on my shoulders.

So how did you step back into the Panthers when you came back? What was happening between Tony and George?

Well, when I came back I said, "Look, you guys have to stop this. George is the chief of staff. He was in charge and you needed to respect that." And Tony said, "Well, I thought you was gone." I said, "Well, I'm back." So Tony left. But everybody stayed with me.

So after the Weed and Seed issue and I turned them down, we needed something that would recapture what the Panthers had prior to me leaving. We needed something. So as I said the L.A. gangs were coming in. They were warring with the Las Vegas gangs. So there was a shooting. I think it was down around Donna Street where a little boy about four years old was shot and killed.

Okay. Donna Street?

Yes, Donna Street. If you go straight down—I don't know what that is—oh, Carey, that would eventually go into Donna Street. So this little kid was killed. I met with Doc Tate, Minister Duke, Marzette, Deborah. And I said, "Man, we've got to try to do something." And so Doc Tate is looking at me, you know, and he said, "Here we go again." And he said, "Well, what you got in mind?" I said, "A gang summit." He said, "You mean like bring all the gang members together?" I said, "Yep." He said, "Man, I don't think we could do that." I said, "Yes, we can." I said, "But we're going to have to get the word out. We're going to hold it over at the mosque because we can't let the white man in." I said, "If we let the white man in, we're going to lose the confidence of the gang members and this has to be for them, about them, and they have to make the decision."

So Frank Hawkins was the city councilman was West Las Vegas, but he was up for re-election and he was in trouble. He was being challenged by this cop, Michael McDonald, a white dude. And so Tate, man, wanted to be sinister about it. Tate said, "Well, man, we ought to contact all these politicians." I said, "Fine with me."

Now, he's talking about the black politicians?

Right. So Yvonne was contacted. Wendell was contacted. Arberry was contacted.

Senator Neal?

Neal was contacted. Everybody turned us down, all of them. All of them turned us down. So I said, "Well, that doesn't surprise you, does it?" And he said, "Man, I would think that they would want to be at something like that." I said, "They don't care nothing about those guys, man. Those guys are a problem. And they don't have an answer how to deal with them, so they're not going to come." I said, "Secondly, they don't think that you're going to pull it off anyway." I said, "Even you don't even think we're going to be able to pull it off."

So what we did was we went out to Wake Up, those women, the Nation, the Panthers, Doc Tate and his couple of people, and we passed out fliers. And Tate said, "Well, man, when are we going to go, in the day?" I said, "Nope, we're going to go at night because that's when the gang members are out." I said, "They don't even come out until night." He said, "Man." And so Tate is a little worried. Now, you know, the Nation and the Panthers had the same type of people; they were all thugs or ex-thugs.

So we went out, we passed out the fliers, a lot of cats were slaying. "Hey, man, you need to come to this, man, this is about you."

The night of the conference, the Panthers come from our office down to—gang members everywhere, hundreds of them. And all of a sudden we got news media pulling up in those trucks with those towers and stuff, man, where they can do live. I said, "Look at this, man." I said, "We did it." I mean it was hundreds of them, man, all kinds of gang members. Some of them were wearing their colors. You know, it was Mexican gangs, there were Crips, there were Bloods. So a couple of white reporters say, "Well, hey, Ron, could you get me in?" I said, "Nope, can't get you in on this

one, man." I said, "It's closed."

So I guess Frank was looking at the news and he saw this because they were broadcasting live outside the mosque. They said something is going on over here. Again, we got named. The Panthers have pulled this off. It was packed. It was wall-to-wall gang members.

So Tate spoke and I was supposed to go second and then Minister Duke. Since they were hosting, they were going to go last. Frank says this guy Greg, who was his supposed community liaison, or gang liaison—now, you've got to remember that Greg had been ran off out from down on Donna Street. He was supposed to have been some kind of gang member from L.A. We don't know what kind of gang. We don't know what he was, but that's what he was claiming. He went down on Donna Street and the Donna Street Crips told him to get out from down there and then they called the press and they said, "Look, you tell Frank if he sends this dude back down here, we're going to send him back in a body bag." So that rendered Greg totally useless in that 35,000-dollar-a-year position.

So anyway, they let Greg go next. He was representing Frank. I don't think he should have said anything at all because Frank should have said something. He should have been there. That guy went on and on and on. He spoke for at least a half hour about how important it was to reelect Frank to office. And you began to see some of the gang members, man, getting uncomfortable and then you saw a couple of them leave. And I think at that point Minister Duke saw what was happening and he said, "Hey, brother, you've got to give the floor up."

So I didn't speak that night, but Minister Duke spoke. But we pulled it off and we asked for a truce. And depending on who you talk to—if you talk to us, the truce held for about two years. If you talk to the police, it didn't hold a week. And the reason that it didn't hold a week is because the cops were doing drive-bys on the gang members.

Now, the reason that we knew is because we were hearing about the shootings and about the

drive-bys and so we went down and we started talking to some of the gang members and we said, "Come on, man, what you guys doing?" They said, "Brother Ron, that's not us." I said, "Well, who is it? Where are they from? Are they from L.A. or where?" He said, "No, those are cops." I said, "How do you know they're cops?" He said, "Hell, we know them. We know what they look like."

So the cops were doing the drive-bys to back up again. But I'm proud of the community and I'm proud of those guys because they held tight and there was no more shootings. The shootings that you did hear about, they weren't gang related. They were just individuals. How blacks have disagreements with each other, it would be that kind of a shooting, a disagreement, but it wasn't the gangs. So we were rather proud of that.

But at the end of that again I had reached that point, man, where I got to go. It had gotten too bad. I had blew it. And the last thing that I did was we created an additional seat, the seat that—I don't know who holds it—oh, the seat that Ricki Barlow holds, we created that seat because that seat didn't exist. It used to be only five city council. Now there's six.

So Lawrence Weekly had it first.

Lawrence Weekly had it first. When Weekly got it, he wasn't voted in, he was appointed in because we created the seat. That was Wendell Williams, basically his idea. He said, "Well, Ron, you guys, man, need to try to create an additional seat because"—the guy is a barber. What's that guy's name? Reese.

Yes. Gary Reese.

Reese. Is he still in it?

No. He's retired.

Yes, I guess so. But he had West Las Vegas. That was part of his district. So everybody said, well, Ron, you should run. By that time Goodman was the mayor. So they said, well, hell, Ron, y'all helped

to create the seat, why don't you throw your name in the hat? So I didn't officially do it. I just hinted about it. But apparently, Weekly wanted to see me. And apparently I guess people told him, well, you know, man, there's a possibility that Ron Current, man, is going to throw his name. He probably asked Goodman, I'm sure he did, and Goodman probably told him if Ron Current throws his name in, he's going to beat you; he's going to get the seat. So the idea is to get Ron Current not to do it.

So I was at a woman's home right there off of Washington who called me to ask me about of all things her daughter who had a drug problem and she didn't know what to do. And we often got those calls for different things, "Hey, man, could the Panthers come over?" And so the lady said, "Can you come over and talk to me because I don't know what to do?" Of all people.

But I went and I was at that woman's home when Larry called me on the cell phone. I knew it was something because he hates my guts. He said, "Hey, man, how you doing?" "Oh, I'm doing all right, man. What do you want?" He said, "What would it take for you to put your name in the hat for the city council position?" And I kick myself today. And I said, "I won't get in it, but if you get it you have to promise me that you will support the West Las Vegas Drug Advisory Committee of which we want to look at the problems of the addicts, man, on Jackson Street." Because at that time it was like 'zombieville.' It was addicts of everywhere. I mean it was hundreds of them. If you ever went down Owens Street and got down to the bottom, you see those homeless people? It looked like that. I said, "Support us on that." He said, "Oh, oh yes, man, I'll support you." I knew I shouldn't have believed the guy, but I wanted to. But you know what? By that time I wanted out.

So how old were you in 1995?

In '95 I was 45 years old.

And you decided to go back to your mother.

Right. So I wanted out. So Larry got the position. He had me on his show.

The morning show on KCEP?

Yes, the show that he has on there now. We started talking about addicts and he pissed me off so bad because he was laughing. He thought they were funny. And I got so pissed that I got up and I said, "Man, I'm out of here." I knew that I had made a mistake; that he had no intentions of supporting anything that had to do with drug addiction even though he now was sitting on EOB board of which controlled the drug rehab over there. Well, we got that shut down. Most of that problem with EOB was brought in because of us. That was the last thing that I did was—

What do you mean the problem with the EOB?

EOB was doing a lot of things that was kind of shady but particularly that rehab. It had two white folks that ran it, (Paralopilis) or something like that was a guy. He was over it. And then they had this broad, this white girl. See, the EOB treatment center was supposed to be a nonprofit. They were supposed to do everything for the individual free, free admittance, they would stay there free, the time, et cetera. But that's about what they were doing is they were charging money. They were getting people released from prison if the person in prison could afford to pay them X amount of dollars. So they would give this woman who also did the assessments, they would pay her X amount of money, she would do the assessment, the assessments would go to the court, and the guy would get out of prison. When people would go to the place now, at any given time they had one black person in a treatment center that's set in the heart of the black community, in the heart of a drug-infested [community], they had one black person.

In treatment?

In treatment, one. So we started complaining about that. And so they said, "Oh, no, no, that's not what's happening." So what we did is we started sending people there like they were addicts. They would look with the smelly clothes and their hair not combed, but they would be our people. And

they would try to charge them an application fee of \$25. So all this would do is you could put in an application, but it cost you \$25. Well, first of all, that didn't make any sense because if an addict got \$25, he ain't going to give it to you. He's going to give that to the dope man. By the time an addict getting ready for treatment, he ain't got nothing left, which is what happened to me.

So we met with the lady. And I felt sorry for her. She was a black woman. She was from either Columbus, Ohio or Dayton, Ohio or someplace. She had sold her home. Her and her husband had sold their home in Ohio. They had moved here. They had bought another home. And she was the now CEO of the EOB. And I really felt sorry for her. But she was so arrogant, as many of those people are. She was so arrogant. And then they had some fool there from the board that was saying what we were saying wasn't true. So I said, okay, enough is enough, meeting over with, we'll see. And eventually the feds came in and they shut it down. So now it doesn't exist. All of its entities have been distributed to other organizations.

Catholic Charities.

Yes, all of that stuff, which I don't have any more faith in. They just are better at appearing that they're doing something. And that's the whole issue today, appearance. But by this time I'm gone.

So that was the end of Las Vegas?

That was it. That was it.

So you moved to Cincinnati.

Moved back to Cincinnati.

And then from there you moved back to Utah?

No. I went to L.A.

Went to L.A. and that's where you got clean.

Right. Well, I got clean in Santa Barbara, California.

Okay. Southern California I should say.

Right. But L.A. and my brother in L.A. is what set the stage that brought me to that what they call point of clarity.

What did he do to bring you to clarity that no one else through all those years could do?

He was my last support. I mean I could always go to Melvin and say, hey, man, look I'm in—keep running Mississippi, man, can you send me some money to get to Oklahoma? And he would do it. Now, when I got back to L.A. he embraced me. He got me a hotel over there on Beverly Boulevard. He embraced me. Then I knew I shouldn't have taken the money, but I did because I wasn't really ready. But I took the money and he gave me, I don't know, a couple hundred dollars. And he said, "Okay, go get a room somewhere that's going to keep you for three, four days." He said, "I have a real estate agent that's looking for an apartment for you." Now, I had gotten a job. I always got jobs.

Which was very easy for you to do.

Yes, it was very easy for me to get a job. He said, "Just go and do that and she'll have a place for you." Well, I went straight to the dope man. I mean straight to the dope man, right there on Washington and La Brea. I found me some crack-head girl and the rest is history. And after I run out of all the money, I first went to my old buddy Reggie, but Reggie never came home. He was working two jobs. He worked at USC and then he would leave USC and go work for the post office, but I didn't know that. So I sat there half the day and finally I said, well, I got to go and face Melvin.

I walked in and he was upstairs working on some kind of record deal that he was working on or he was getting ready to open somewhere. I just didn't know how to tell him, but finally I just said, "Look, I blew it, man." He like looked up and he said, "You spent all that money on crack?" And he was a former crack addict himself. So he knew. He said, "Man, you spent all that money?" He said,

"Look, Ronnie, I'm not going to help you no more, man." He said, "I'm sorry, I won't help you."

And I just broke down, man. I cried like all of this pain had been in me all those years, man. So I said, "Well, I only need one of these." And I had gotten these razor blades. So I laid all of them on the desk except for one. And I walked out and I went across the street to La Brea Tar Pits. If you've ever seen that movie, man, you know where it is.

Right. I know where it is.

Yes. And I went over there and I was sitting up in the bushes up on this little hill. I saw this guy come by with I'm sure it was his son and I started thinking about my own son, you know. I was sitting there holding this razor. You ever felt like your whole world—there was no reason to live anymore. And I just started cutting, man. And I mean it was deep and it was just pouring blood. I was sitting there and I was talking to God. And then it started to try to gel and I was rubbing it on my jeans. I said, "No, no." I wanted to die.

And finally, man, I thought that I didn't want to die. So I said I don't really want to die. So I said, well, maybe if Melvin will see all this blood, he'll forgive me. And I went over. I mean I looked like somebody had dipped me in a bucket of red paint it was so much blood. He opened the door and he looked at me and he said, "Man, you need some help." And he closed the door. He just closed the door. Finally he opened it back and I just fell on my knees, man, and I said, "Melvin, I'm sorry." And I really was. I really was sorry, but I understood. And he said, "Man, I won't help you no more." He said, "You're on your own." And I said, "Man, can you just give me enough, man, to get to Malibu?"

So what was in Malibu?

Malibu, I have a rock, my favorite place. I used to go there and just sit there and watch the ocean and watch the sun go down. It was my favorite place. That's where I was going to die. I said, "Can you just give me enough money, man, to get to Malibu?" So he gave me a whole thing full of quarters. He

said, "Ronnie, man, you don't need to do this." I said, "Yes, I do." Oh, man, I get kind of emotional thinking about it. But I said, "Yes, I do, man." I said, "I ain't worth nothing, man." He said, "Yes, you are, but you've got to believe it." He said, "You just need to get some help, Ronnie." I said, "No, man." I said, "It's over."

So I drove out there and I was sitting there and I was still bleeding profusely. By this time I had wrapped towels around it. They were just soaked. And I was sitting there and I had this old phone book and I took it and I threw it into the ocean and I just said, "Die," just die. And I was sitting there and I was watching these seagulls and they were like playing king of the rock. One would get up on the rock and another one would jump on it and they would knock him off, all except one. There was this one seagull that just stood there all by himself and no other bird bothered him and he just kept looking at me. And I'm looking back at him. Finally he said, "If you go north you can find what you're looking for." And I'm thinking I don't know what I'm looking for. But the bird said, "If you go north you'll find what you've been looking for."

And what I wanted was I wanted to be accepted and I wanted to be free, but I didn't know what freedom was. I knew that I wanted to be somebody, but I needed to be free to be somebody. And so I mean it was kind of crazy. I thought I was losing my mind because this bird, man, was talking to me. And so I said, well, what else, man? I probably won't make it wherever I'm going. I won't make it anyway. I'm probably going to die of blood loss.

And so I got in the car and I got on the 101 and I just kept driving. Finally I came through Santa Barbara. I just followed these signs and it took me to this hospital that was on top of this hill. People today tell me, man, nobody could have found that hospital. Even if you were looking for it, you had to be directed to it. And I went straight to this hospital.

So I'm sitting there. I got no money. And I got all this blood over me. I was embarrassed. And

so this nurse said, "Well, what happened?" And I said, "Oh man, never mind." I said, "It don't matter." And I got ready to get up and walk out. He said, "Hey, wait a minute, wait a minute, hold it, man." He said, "Come on in here."

So I go in and this doctor, his name is Greg Olsen, I will never forget him. He's married to Kathy Ireland. So he said, "What happened?" I said, "Ah, man, it don't make any difference." He said, "Come on, let's talk about it." So I told him about what I had done and why I had done it. I said, ah, man, you know. He said, "There's somebody that can help you." I said, "Man, don't nobody care about me." He said, "No, God loves you, man." I said, ah, you know.

So finally we made an agreement that I wouldn't try to hurt myself anymore if they got me to the Santa Barbara Rescue Mission, which had a program. So I go there and I stay there that night. There was some brothers there then. There don't allow brothers there no more, but there were some brothers there then.

What do you mean don't allow them?

They discriminate big time. The dude that's running it now is a racist. But anyway, there was a number of brothers there. They said, "Well, ask Howard." And Howard was the men's program director. About getting into the program. And it was a year-long Christian program. So I went to him and he said, "Well, come to see me in three days." That used to be their period. You had to wait three days and I guess they tried to figure out whether or not you were going to do whatever.

So anyway, I go to the beach that day, beautiful beach, most beautiful beaches you ever want to see.

Oh, yes, I agree.

And I laid there and I slept most of the day. Got up. And you had to be back at the mission by six o'clock. So I got there. I again stayed at the mission. The next day I went to Howard and asked him

again could I get in the program, and I still have bandages all over me and stuff. But he had been told not to let me in.

By whom?

By Mike Guy, who was the head of the mission, because I was suicidal.

Oh, I see. Okay.

So Howard said, "Well look, man, what I'll do is I'll try to find someplace for you to go." Now, Santa Barbara has a number of rehabs, but every one that he called was full. So finally he put the phone down and he said, "Look, man, I've done what I could, man." He said, "I can't take you because my boss told me not to." He said, "We don't have any place for somebody that's suicidal." And this is what sold him. I said, "Yes, but I don't want to kill myself if I'm not getting high." And he couldn't say nothing. He was stuck. And we both spoke at the Promise Keepers—remember that big thing that they used to have all over the country, Promise Keepers?

Yes.

Well, I was one of the key speakers and so was Howard. He said, "I don't know what to say." The guy had me. He said, "Hey, man, you're in." He said, "Don't let me down." And that's how I got into the program. That's how I found relief.

Now, I relapsed one time back in September the 12th, 2000, is when I relapsed. I relapsed for one day. And I ran, I immediately ran back to the mission. I said, "Hey, man, I relapsed." And that was it; that was the final time. I don't even think about it no more.

So for 12 years you have been clean.

I've been clean for 12 years. And I was over at the Seven Seas and I was right across from where I used to buy drugs.

So which corner?

H Street and Lake Mead. There's some projects right there.

So is that where the Nevada Partners is now?

Right, Nevada Partners.

So they've tore down—

No. All that stuff is still there. The projects are still there.

So it must be over behind there someplace.

No. You can see the projects. The projects are right there on the corner. You've got projects here, a corner house here. And across from that corner house is Nevada Partners. Across from there is the Seven Seas. I had to go by there to talk to Mr. Connelly's man about the book signing and the guys was out there. I just kind of stood there and I just kind of looked at them and I said, wow, man, it's been a long time, man.

So you have a book signing here in Las Vegas?

Yes. It will be over at Seven Seas tomorrow between two and six.

And I just didn't feel anything, nothing. I said, "Thank you, Lord."

Isn't that great?

So I wish that those things could have happened to me now, you know. I certainly wouldn't have made the decisions that I made. But the Panthers was a good thing for the city. But you have to continue. As I said, we're in a state of appearance both politically and socially. It only appears that we're not in trouble. It only appears that way. And although they show that we're in trouble, we're in much deeper trouble than it appears that we are. We are in serious trouble.

I remember Louis Farrakhan saying back in '95 that there would come a time when the black community will turn its back on the gang members because at one time we were the only support they had. We tried to legitimize everything and excuse everything that they did. People are not doing that

no more. People are just, hey, man, look, get them out of here. But I think the impact, what's that about is to say we have to give them a chance. We've got to give them an opportunity. We've got to give them an opportunity to fail. And if we don't truly do that, can we really say that they are as bad as we are saying that they are? Or is it that they just didn't have another opportunity? I mean we place a lot of emphasis on education. I'm not an educated person, but I agree with education. But I understand that education is not everything because some people just don't qualify to get a college degree.

And it doesn't have to be.

We have to have vocational positions out there.

Yes. Yes.

Vocational jobs. My father was totally illiterate, couldn't read and write. But he ran seven dry cleaners, could take a car apart and put it back together and never read a book.

Yes. What is your greatest regret?

That I didn't find peace fast enough. I mean my life is pretty much over. I had a stroke. I look normal. But I think that my life is coming to a close. I'm just hoping that once in a great while somebody here says, yes, man, you remember that guy Ron Current? Yes, he did some things. He was kind of messed up, but, man, his heart was in the right place. I think that that's all that I can ask for. I did the best I could with what I had to work with and sometimes that was very little, but my heart was in the right place. It really was.

Wonderful. That's a great ending. Thank you so much.

Sure. My pleasure. Enjoy the rest of the book.

Oh, I will.

[End of recorded interview]

