Interview with Monk Teba (Willie T. Kent)

Interviewed on January 28, 2018

by David J. Byrnes, President

at Midway Village Museum

David Byrnes: Ok, if you just want to say your name and when you were born. This is a test.

Monk Teba: Testing. This is Monk Teba, Willie Kent, born October 28, 1945 in Tallahassee County, Mississippi.

DB: So let's just follow through here. So, you already wrote down that you are not from Rockford originally, but why don't you mention that again.

MT: Well, I'm not from Rockford originally. My family migrated up to the North from Mississippi.

DB: Ok. And what was your childhood like?

MT: I come from a pretty functional family. I had a pretty good childhood. I had a mother and father in the house which made a big difference. I lived in a neighborhood that I probably could call the name of every 30 or 40 men who lived in the houses with their families. We… most of the families were two-part families – two members of the household there. A mother and a father, and that made a significant difference I think in grounding me. The neighborhood I came from which is over by Christina Street, we had a lot of people who ended up graduating high school and going on to college. I think that as first generation members coming out of the south we did pretty good.

DB: And what was your education like?

MT: I graduated from West High School in 1964. I started out, I attended Blackhawk College that fall of '64, got drafted into the military in 1965. I currently went back to school cause I went to a lot of the colleges during the '60s and the early '70s to organize and so I really was never serious about that aspect of my education. I went back and two years ago I graduated from Rock Valley College and right now I am a senior at the age of 72 in Northern Illinois University. My major is Family & Health Development, with my emphasis on human services and working with drug addiction.

DB: Okay. Very cool. What was your elementary school that you attended?

MT: I went to Kishwaukee Elementary School.

DB: Oh, oh, well. You probably have mixed feelings about that school closing then.

MT: Yes and no. In the sense that, you know, I guess from the nostalgic point of view, you know, you always like to see the old things stay, but at the same time, in terms of community development, I can understand that.

DB: What were the conditions for African Americans like in Rockford in the 1960's?

MT: Well, for African Americans it is always a challenge, but I think that as I got older and traveled I found out that I had some advantages that a lot of people didn't have in the way that I was brought up. I look at race relations and there was always a mix. I think racism in terms of institutional racism has always been here, but the impact it had on my childhood was marginal from the standpoint of actually being challenged. I could remember when we were in Mississippi, and even though I came up here when I was 4 or 5 years old, I could still remember the colored only signs, I can remember the segregated washrooms, and that type of thing, and I didn't experience that in Rockford. You know, I was grateful for that later when I look back, but at the same time, I became aware of the fact that as a black person there were some limitations that were being imposed on me, primarily because of my race and not because of my ability. I think I started noticing that at Kishwaukee, in fact. You know, in 5th or 6th grade when you'd do things and excel, could be in a spelling contest or something else, and this cute little girl that you was trying to impress was not impressed, and later I found out she was not impressed because I didn't have blond hair and blue eyes and that type of stuff. But at the same time, there was another cute little girl looked just like her that was impressed or did uh, was cordial with me as a friend and so I saw that and a lot of my friends that I developed coming through school were legitimate friends, you know, regardless of our color. I think of Merritt Mott for instance, you may not know Mott Brothers [Plumbing]. Merritt was a guy I grew up with at school, and I can remember he was sharing how he was at a conference and it was for industrialists, and they had suggested that if you didn't have relationships with any black people, that you go foster some and develop some and he said he thought about our relationship. He said, well listen, we a have a real genuine relationship. I don't have to foster this for, to be politically correct with the business, you know, and that was the way I looked at a lot of stuff. Even in the Black Panther Party, there were certain people I grew up with, that uh, guys like Joe Vincere, who was a policeman and you know, when people started talking about that off the page type stuff we used to talk about, you know, there were good policemen that were good people. You know we also drew distinctions about, that term pig was just a political term. It did not apply to all the policemen and there were times in some of my political education, we would talk about the policemen that were

good policemen. Guys that, you know, I used to see Joe and I told him I got your back, you know, cause a lot of policemen during that time during the 60's and early 70's were actually fearful, just like some of them are now, that somebody could target them for some political reason, say "I'm gonna go out and off a pig," so to speak. We didn't have that type of antagonism and a lot of that came from the fact that a lot of the policemen that were on the force, I did know personally and I, some of them I grew up with and that made a significant difference, cause then you start looking at them as some distant enemy, [instead] they became people you had a relationship with and that made a big difference.

DB: Ok, let's go back. Do you want to talk more about the relationship with the police?

MT: No, no, we good.

DB: Okay. Maybe just touch on the police authority, you know the people in charge of the police. Did you have any relationships with them?

MT: Yes, I did. That was another significant thing in Rockford because as a Panther I was in both Rockford and Chicago and the relationship with the Chicago was significantly different than Rockford. In Rockford, the Police Chief, Mr. Del Peterson, we had dialog with him. And if there was something going on we could actually call a meeting with him and he would respond and meet with us. That was a real big thing. Officers like Sam Gaynor who was a lieutenant then, we had utmost respect for him. We had a relationship with him. That makes a difference. There was a James Hill on the Sheriff's Department, who actually suffered some repercussions because of his relationship with the, with the Panthers, and that it was not a hostile relationship like some people wanted it to be in that we had a relationship of mutual respect and he ended up losing his job for coming on a TV show with me and a guy named Lincoln Powell who were Panthers. But anyway, we had, we had that dialog that made the difference. In Chicago, when I first got there, there was no dialogue. Now later there came to be some as a result of some of our activities in Chicago. I can remember one time I got into some type of trouble in Chicago and I got arrested and I was trying to think of some way, cause I knew the police of Chicago at that time had a tendency of beating people. And so I was, I think I ducked down in the [police] car, and the officer, the detective asked why am I doing that. I [chose] "in case people started shooting I didn't want to get hit," and man, he really got disturbed and started talking and we started talking about why it happens and that there is no dialogue between the Chicago police and anybody, and by the time we got to the police station he was asking me if I could arrange a meeting with him sometime with Bobby Rush [cofounder of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers]. I said I'm pretty sure that can be done and of course when I got to the station where the gang intelligence officers were, he had already assured that nobody was gonna put their hands on me, and later when Huey Newton [cofounder of the national

Black Panther movement] came to town I was meeting with a woman named Joanne Wolf or something, I think her husband is a, and she was an attorney at that time but her husband was a judge in Chicago, and she told me about the same police officer that arrested me and that we had the conversation in the car, being at a bar and defending the Panthers because of that conversation. Cause he would say, "No, they not all bad," that he actually got into a fight with somebody in the bar defending them because of that comment, but my point was that we had dialogue in Rockford. And that made a real big difference. And that, there was never an incident of a Panther and a police officer having any type of physical confrontation involving a weapon. I mean there were arrests, there may have been something like that, but in Chicago there was many incidents, you know what I mean, where a policeman got killed, Panthers got killed, but Rockford, because of that dialog, we didn't have that.

DB: In what ways were you politically active in the early and mid '60s?

MT: Oh well, I mean I was active with the Black Panther Party. We started out, before I had entered the Panthers, I had started a program on the west side of Rockford working with the United Methodist Church. It was the SOS program and I was a "Shepard of the Street". That's what SOS stands for. I worked with a guy named Bob Craft and also, Reverend Jordan, Charles Jordan, and Doctor White. I can't remember Doctor White's first name, but those were the people in the Methodist Church that I worked with and they had given support. I started a program on the west end. It called House of [Osimba], the African Lion, and that was part of the West Side Culture Club, and eventually when Fred Hampton and the Black Panther Party came to Rockford we joined the Panthers and most of the members of the West Side Culture Club became Panthers. That was at 529 South Pierpont, which is no longer there, but that was our target area.

And of course from the '60s all the way through the mid-'70s I was working with the Black Panther Party. Oh, I'd say from '68 to about '71 I actually left the Panthers but I still worked with them. We came here. We started the Northern Illinois Community Survival Center, and that was on West [State] Street, and with a lot of people that became prominent in this community came back to Rockford, started working with us from the Panthers there, and that was a transition thing. Huey Newton, when he had gotten [unintelligible] to make a statement how the Black Panther Party had defected from the black community, that it was pretty much doing their own thing, it was pretty much [Cleaver] who was responsible for a lot of young black men getting killed with this, he always had one of those type of jihad missions, "it's time to pick up the gun and off the pig," not realizing that guns and weapons for us were only symbolic. There was, at no time did the Black Panther Party believe that the change in America was gonna come through the Panthers having guns and doing that. Yes, in places like Chicago it was a part of your vigilance, to have some type of security because you had all different kinds of elements in Chicago that could have attacked you, you know, and so… But the gun was a symbol, because we were very strongly constitutional, the constitutional right to bear arms, that was our whole thing. Our whole thing about dealing with America came from the preamble of the Constitution. We talk about when the

injustices become so severe that it is time to separate, that the constitution gives the people a right to separate, but that was with a strong caution, only when this becomes intolerable. So that was always like a card we was using to say this is what we should be doing, trying to separate if we can't get [justice], but we more of, in the '60s, an assimilation working with other groups, coalitions. The Black Panther Party was not a Black nationalist group, we believed that the problem in America was a class struggle. The Haves versus the Have Nots, and that more people had, did not have than had, so to speak, and so we [used to join a coalition].

That also lead to a problem with groups like us out in California, [inaudible] and those people and a lot of the other culture nationalists and Black nationalists used to criticize us for our coalitions with Caucasian groups and other types of groups, because they were into the racial thing and we were never into the racial thing. We always recognized this as being a class struggle. Let's see what else was I doing in the '60's?

DB: Well, I just want to follow up on the House of [Osimba], what was the program there in terms of what you did?

MT: The House of [Osimba] was basically dealing with African American Pride, and dealing with the relationship… the historical disconnect between many black people, including myself, and our history. House of [Osimba], we started out getting into the African garb and dress, and I had seen a program in, I think, Ebony Magazine called African Lookshop and the whole African dress, that type of stuff. So we started dealing with that and then dealing with the Swahili language and teaching that and at that time, that's when most of people, including myself, our names and things would change. Cause as you know my birth name was Willie Kent, but like Mohamad Ali and others I felt that was a slave owner's name and I wanted my own name. My name came when, [I remember,] I was [enlisted] in the military, I really got my name, Monk Teba, which is really a short derivative of [Monkuo] Teba, which stands for "is man called Teba." But Monk Teba, I always worked with children so it was easier to say Monk Teba for the children's sake. But that was, a lot of these people, a lot of African Americans changed their names and you still got some right now, they are still doing that, and that's the thing. I am one of those people who believe, like a lot of Native Americans would say, we give you a birth name and when you become an adult you get a spirit name, your spirit will give you a name that you will accept, it's not a name that mom gave you or dad gave you, this will be a name that the spirit gives you. That's my spiritual name, Monk Teba. Although, I will say this, during my sojourn in the Black Panther Party it became, actually, a defense, which I didn't know until later. My family was not ridiculed and attacked as much by other forces that were hostile towards the Black Panther Party cause they focused on Monk Teba, they didn't focus on Kent.

DB: Were the "forces," does that include the media, the press?

MT: When I say "forces" I mean anybody that, you know, that just did not like Panthers. It could be law enforcement, it could be, [any kind of] hostile forces. Sometimes people find out, you know, well "your son is a Panther, I'm not gonna give you this loan," or "I'm not gonna sell you this…" you know, stuff like that. Although, the FBI knew who I was. They knew my [full name]. They used to visit my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother had… We had a FBI agent named Murphy, and I mention his name because we all remember his name because he was doing his job, but at the same time he showed compassion to us, and I think that's again… that's in Rockford, that was not the way it was in Chicago. He was the type of FBI agent who would come and tell us, "You know you guys, you got a warrant and they're gonna be looking for you," you know, he didn't come out and draw a gun - "I'm gonna arrest you cause you got this here warrant for some misdemeanor or something like that, but his job, I think, was to monitor what we were doing and report. My grandmother used to make him pray. She used to "I'm not gonna talk to you, you've gotta pray with me first." He used to come see my mother, I can remember him telling my mother, and I guess maybe he was speaking as a father, and he was telling them about, because I have four brothers that became panthers with me, and had one brother who when he got ready to leave he changed his lifestyle. But Murphy told my mother, said "Well, your son Willie? Monk? There's no hope for him, he's a diehard revolutionist, but Roy, [there] is" and my mother would repeat this stuff to us. So in a lot of ways I was grateful for the relationship I developed, in Rockford, with the authorities because it was different than what I dealt with in Chicago.

DB: Gosh, there was something I was going to go back to. So, you left the Panthers in '68?

MT: No, we joined in '68. I left around '71, '72. Officially left, although I went back and I started working with Bobby Rush and I ended up working with Harold Washington. We used to go to Chicago and canvas for the 42nd ward. It was Rush and those two were involved and we helped develop that political base that Bobby Rush used to become a congressman now. A lot of people didn't know that here we were living in Rockford, but doing canvasing work in Chicago and the Robert Taylor projects and all that because of having that relationship with the Panthers and stuff. We helped Harold Washington too, but that goes all the way back to I think '70, '76, we were working with him doing the same thing, helping him, you know, to become the first black mayor of Chicago.

DB: So the Black Panther Chapter in Rockford got its start because, you said, someone arrived in Rockford?

MT: Yeah, Fred Hampton came in. Now what happened, we was not necessarily looking for the Black Panther Party as an organization to join. We was looking for any national organization that could focus

on the political situation in Rockford and the institutional racism that was in Rockford, that was our big issue, especially the school system. We really, we really was… The Board of Education… the Rockford Board of Education, we felt as being one of the, probably, the prominent institutional example of racism in the way that they did stuff. Later on there was a lawsuit, the People Who Care lawsuit, you know, which actually substantiated what we felt.

But, we tried, we sent a letter to the NAACP, this was our culture club, we didn't get a response, we sent a letter to the Congress of Racial Equality, CORE, I think it was Roy Innis who, I don't know who it was then, we didn't get a response from them. We sent something to, I think the Urban League, but we sent something to SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which a lot of Panthers came from, including Stokley Carmichael and Ralph Featherstone responded to us and said that they would be interested; that SNCC would be interested, in working and setting up a chapter and doing something in Rockford. However, before Ralph could follow up on that he was assassinated in Carolina. A car that blew up. You can probably google that up and probably get more information on that. He was one of the prolific organizers for SNCC. Of course you know SNCC was involved with the city and movement of the students and that type of stuff. And so Fred Hampton and Bobby, Bobby Rush was a member of SNCC, and so that's, you know, they, I'm not sure if Ralph got in contact with them or whatever, but Fred came and… Oh, wait a minute, this is interesting, the relationship was actually fostered more by Lincoln Charles Powell, and you may want to write that down. Lincoln Charles Powell was the air force security agent who was sent to Rockford to find out what the relationship was in the Black community between people like Margie Sturgis, Deacon Davis, Reverend Eldridge Gilbert, people like Willie Kent Monk Teba. We all, we had formed a group, because the Rockford Board of Education, which brought us all together, we was all so upset with the school board and so… that was what the coalition was… Lincoln Powell got in contact with Fred Hampton too and-- cause we had our meeting at Lincoln Powell's house. At that time Lincoln had not told us that he was an agent for the government, but most of us suspected that. There were too many things he was doing that didn't make sense. He had money – and we didn't have money. He could travel to Oakland on an airplane to be at the Free Huey rally and he'd come back with "Free Huey" on his brief case. It was all just… We said, someone's paying you to do this, but anyway. It was like a joke, but eventually I think after Fred Hampton got assassinated Lincoln did tell us that he was an agent and that he was working for, you know… [he was paying someone]. Sundstrand hired him to, they were working with the government, so they gave him like a front as a job saying that he was working for Sundstrand, but Lincoln Powell was, facilitated Fred Hampton coming here. Fred Hampton started, we started a chapter in the fall of 1968.

DB: Now, you mentioned the Reverend Gilbert, what was your relationship with him?

MT: Well, first off, I went to school with his son Skip. He was like a, you know, a mentor in the community. He was a community leader. We worked with him but the coalition that we developed was to try to deal with the Rockford Board of Education so that's how I worked with him. His tactics and my

tactics were different. I laud him because in the end he did encourage me to keep doing what I was doing and I am grateful for that. Cause you know, Margie Sturgis, she was one of the original black teachers in Rockford with Constance Lane. Margie Sturgis. She ran for mayor one time. She's passed too. Of course with Connie I worked with her son, Jimmy Renick -- James Renick-- he's a doctor now. He [wasn't] influential in the Panthers, but he was a person who was strong in the movement in Rockford.

DB: Just want to quickly go back to the Northern Illinois Community Survival Center. What was the program at that place?

MT: Ok, We was on South Main and Morgan in that area and the idea was community survival programs, breakfast for children was our biggest ones, that was an extension of what we were doing at the Black Panther Party, and we had breakfast locations at St. Elizabeth's, at the old Grace United Methodist Church on West State. We was feeding a hundred children a day at Fairgrounds, and we had a location on [Pierpont] and Preston. They didn't all run simultaneously, different locations, but those are some of the places and those were some of the things we coordinated out of there. Also we had a couple meetings, I don't know if you know Father James Clemmons in Chicago. [*Note: Likely Father George Clements of Holy Angels Parish on Chicago's South Side*] Father Clemmons… Holy Cross Church I think it is, Father Clemmons… They had a rally there. We took 4000 chickens from the… Are you familiar with the chicken farm, chicken factory that used to be out by the airport in Rockford?

DB: No.

MT: The old chicken factory, they used to do chickens, slaughter them and package them and we purchased 4000 chickens from there and took them into the rally in Chicago. All of that out of our Community Survival Center, but the main thing was to come up with programs that we called Survival Programs for the community. Things that were needed. The breakfast program was probably our key because we came to the early conclusion that the most important meal [sic] for children going to school was breakfast and that a lot of children suffered because they went to school hungry and you know that lead to them sleeping in class and fatigue and other problems. Eventually the government picked the program up, you know, like a lot of other programs they picked up. Cause at that time, to the best of my knowledge, they didn't have food stamps or anything that I can remember. That came in the 70's.

DB: Okay. What was your role in the Black Panthers?

MT: I was an organizer at Rockford. I was what they… A field lieutenant and a chairman of the branch, one of the branch's head chairmen. When we went to Chicago, probably the most significant role I

played in Chicago, I was the next person in line for leadership under Fred Hampton. The next person in line under leadership, under Bobby Rush was a guy named Harold Bell. If you look up his name, he was actually one of the defendants in the house where Fred Hampton got killed and they eventually won a lawsuit there, you know the fact that they had their civil rights violated. The way that happened was that in 1969 they had what they called a purge. Something was going wrong in Chicago so all the Panthers had to come to Rockford so I became on the leadership there in Chicago, and I stayed, remained in Chicago for like, until '71, till I came back to Rockford. I was on the Chairman's Cadre, I was head of the Administrator of Information. They called me the Administrator of Information cause I was responsible for the newspaper, bringing it into Chicago and distributing it, and also writing articles in it.

Trying to think, what else? Also, in the Northern Illinois Community Survival Committee, which is extended from the Panthers, I was the chief coordinator in that, you know, and we did some great things in that. With Chicago Coalition we was able to set up the Illinois Black Political Caucus and work with the Illinois Black Political Caucus, which is part of the National Black Political Caucus which had a national rally, I think, in Gary in 1974 and we was able to… Rockford, and Peoria, and East Saint Louis was able to solidify the relationship, the leadership, in opposition to Jesse Jackson who wanted the leadership, but Jesse was just in Chicago and we was in Rockford, and we was in Peoria, and we was in Saint Louis, and Jesse didn't have those kinds of relationships and that came about. I don't know [unintelligible] not important, but the committee that put that together, I was a coordinator in that, you know, so.

DB: Ok. Just to understand better, just because so many people think of guns when they think of the Black Panthers, was there a person in charge like an armorer or anything like that in charge of weapons or did everybody bring their own weapons or…

MT: Well, we had a security guy. You know, we had a Chief Head of Security that was primarily in charge of the weapons, but the thing about it is that we had a mandate that every Panther had to have a shotgun, and the shotgun was more of a national symbol, you know. It was a weapon that you could hunt with and that you could defend yourself with. Probably as an assault weapon, if I can remember correctly the Geneva Conventions outlawed the shotgun, because of Vietnam they used to use the shotgun on point because of the fact that you could, double [unintelligible], they used to call it the old scatter guns. We'd got a mandate that all Panthers have a shotgun, but that was part of the support for the second amendment, the right to bear arms, you know, and we felt that was crucial and even though I'm not a proponent of arms now, I still feel that that right is significant in America. That, you know, in a totalitarian state they will take all the weapons away from everybody and only the people who work with that state can have weapons and I feel that part of America's fundamental freedom is the fact that they've had the right to bear arms and, you know, I still support that.

DB: What do you feel were the most important parts of the Black Panther agenda?

MT: Well I think serving the community. I believe that was the most important thing. [Preserving], organizing, serving the community and trying to empower the people. Part of the Panther's thing was that we were not to be institutionalized. We were not supposed to remain. It was supposed to be a temporary thing. For us, to get the people started, the real power came from the people, that the need for the Black Panther Party as such would pass, and I think history proved that we were right in that.

DB: So, what do you think was the impact that the Black Panthers had on the situation in Rockford?

MT: Well, I think that the Blank Panther Party made a positive difference. As I said before, our focus was on the Rockford Board of Education, and we had an impact on the groups that later helped change some of the things that were going on with education in Rockford. Delridge Hunter… well we had a boycott, first thing and we was able to create what they call the Washington Community School. That was, I think, in… oh, was it, late '68 and Delridge Hunter became the Ombudsman for that program, but the…

DB: I'm sorry, who?

MT: Ombudsman, Delridge Hunter

DB: Oh, Delridge Hunter, ok.

MT: That's a name you might want to look up. He had a lot to do with the transition of education and our emphasis on education. Anyway, the Rockford Board of Education found out that he was a Panther and he ended up getting fired. And I think, who was it… I can't recall her name … She was on the Board of Education and the only black member at the time and she voted to try and keep him, but he was fired as a result of that. Delridge Hunter was a significant part of our group as far as us focusing on the need to make changes in the educational system here in Rockford. We also had a role in development of the Chance Program in northern Illinois and perfecting that.

DB: Chance Program?

MT: Yes. The first Chance director was McKinley Deacon Davis and he came out of our black coalition here in Rockford. Which other Black Coalition members, as I mentioned before, included people like Rev. Gilbert, Margie Sturgis, and Del Hunter and others and that was one of the reason's Lincoln Powell came here, because he was saying that the things we were doing were having such a great, were not only impacting Rockford but Northern Illinois University. Because at that we took over the president's office and made demands just like we did in Rockford. The Chance Program was one of the things that came out of those demands. I don't know if you are familiar with Chance, but if you looked that up that's a program that allows minority students to be able to get help to go to NIU. [But our agenda] dealing with the education and also dealing with politically organizing people, that was important. One of the things… That was a set back to us, to all the stuff we were doing in Rockford, that came about, we had to go to Chicago to hold up things in Chicago, that we lost some of the foothold we had in Rockford, that I felt had made a difference. On the west side of Rockford in the Washington Park area there was a community housing project called Valerie Percy Housing. You may have heard of that…

DB: Valerie Percy?

MT: Valerie Percy, named after Chuck, Senator Chuck Percy's daughter that had been mysteriously killed in her house, and when it started out it was good. It was built around the same time as Concord Commons and they were probably about 7 blocks apart. When we had to close up the Panther office in Rockford and go to hold up Chicago when they was having problems there, the gangbangers took over Valerie Percy and as a result, and you know the authorities just couldn't deal with it and so eventually when John McNamara became mayor they [ended up] razing the whole thing and I point that out because we had a breakfast program there, we was doing a lot of good work in there and that could have probably… That housing… You build, you know, some housing and tear it down in less than 10 years, you know, that's, something's wrong there. But anyway, I get off track when I talk about stuff and kind of loose focus…

DB: What do you think about the Panthers in Rockford that didn't work as you hoped it would?

MT: That didn't work?

DB: Yeah.

MT: You mean programs and stuff?

DB: Yeah.

MT: What I said about Valerie Percy is one, because that was an opportunity to really come up with some model community programs. What happened, in looking back I see that but as I say, everything has a purpose. And by the grace of God I was able to move into Champion Park later and work with the Hope 6 Program, and I wrote about 5 different proposals. I had 3 of them adopted, and eventually we was able to get the money from HUD to put a new housing development that took place out there in the Washington Park area, which if you went out there, let's say in the late '90s and you see what's out there now, it's a significantly different community. They used to call it Skunk's Hollow. It's not anymore, but anyway. Some of that stuff came about as a result of what started in the Black Panther Party, wasn't able to do, cause it was trying to uplift the community, to get the people to empower themselves, to make the transition and change. To, as Walter Cronkite used to say, support their franchise in the American system, and unfortunately we wasn't able to do it on our terms, but a lot of that stuff did come to pass. You know… I mean… Harold Washington did become the first black mayor of Chicago with a political base that had some connections to Rockford and a lot of what we tried to do in Rockford we was able to do in Chicago. I look at some of the … this may sound farfetched to some people but that 40 seconds of work we did set the conditions for people like Barack Obama to become President because we set the conditions from Rockford, working with Bobby Rush, for Rush to become congressman. The last political defeat that Barack Obama had was to Bobby Rush when he ran against him, and we said, we told people, yeah, we spanked his butt and he got in line and he became a senator and then he became the President.

DB: Let's talk about the relationships with other parts of the community like with other black residents or white residents? We've already talked about the police quite a little bit, so… Maybe just, how, how was the Black Panther Party viewed in the black community?

MT: The black community supported the Black Panther Party, especially the ones in the neighborhoods we were in. Mostly, any people that were opposed to us were the ones that really didn't know, and they was dealing with the stereotypes that was fostered in the media. Now, a lot of times they was focusing on the gun fights between the Panthers and Police in other places and that was not the type of situation we had in Rockford. It was a whole different program here. But we had a good relationship with the black community.

DB: Okay …and then white residents in general?

MT: Those that understood, we formed coalitions with and were able to work with. Those that didn't understand, you know, we weren't able to work with them. I think the institutional racism that was manifest through the Rockford Board of Education, it was supported by a lot of people who were still into red lining communities, and trying to keep blacks out, and still dealing with that thing. Schools like Guilford for instance, and Boylan, became symbolic of what we were fighting against. The fact that the quality of education at Guilford was significantly different than what you got at West or Auburn (when West was a high school), which was the grounds of the People Who Care lawsuit. It was found to be true in federal court, and so the people who supported that type of system were mostly the people who, were mostly white and those were most of the people we had our most hostilities with, political hostilities.

DB: Well I think we have discussed who in the community was willing to work with the Black Panthers and who was not, but maybe just to follow up with among the whites who you were saying, that people who supported the things the way they were and resisted your efforts to change, were there any specific groups in the white population who you cooperated with or who cooperated with you?

MT: Well yeah, the United Methodist Church was one. We worked, I mean some of the people at Saint Elizabeth's. There were some groups at Rock Valley College, some student groups that were primarily white that we worked with… Trying to think of any other alliances that we developed. I can't think of anything off, right off the top of my head.

DB: No, that helps. Now you mentioned that you were arrested as part of, being part of the Black Panthers as part of your activities. What were the given reasons for your arrest?

MT: Oh God, let me see. One was some kind of driving offense, another one was… I had an outstanding warrant for something in Chicago, I cannot remember what. That's when I had the [unintelligible] with the Gang Intelligence Unit. Oh, stuff like for instance, there was a time that, when we had had a vehicle stolen and we got the vehicle back but they hadn't took the vehicle off the "stolen" sheet and we was driving the vehicle and then they arrested us even though we had got the owner's name and the owner tried to call and say the vehicle is no longer stolen, but, you know, we had to go through that type of stuff.

DB: So were they mostly trumped up charges, do you think?

MT: Not so much trumped up in terms of like some people who were actually stopped, arrested and people placed drugs or something on them. No, that didn't happen. I think I had a charge once where we had an activity under the Northern Illinois Community Survival Center, a program on [trans] art and noise violation, even though everyone in the community was in support of us we didn't want to make any noise, but I never had any real significant charges because of me being in the Black Panther Party. I was harassed a lot, and then so stuff that I did had, people did try to turn it into something.

DB: But, now you said you were arrested in Rockford?

MT: Yeah, yeah. I've been arrested in Rockford and in Chicago.

DB: How were you treated when you were arrested?

MT: In Rockford I didn't have any problems. Well, in Chicago I didn't have any problems either, in terms of I wasn't abused or anything like that. And by the grace of God I have never been beaten by a policeman. I think that one of the differences though has something to do with my upbringing and living in Rockford and having to develop a multi-racial relationship. I can remember times in Chicago where I got stopped by the police, and they stopped, I had a… one time I was stopped, I think it was '72, and my cousin Leon Kent had just been murdered in Statesville, I mean Pontiac, in a riot and we didn't know that, but I think because I was always under surveillance the police did know that. I don't think, I don't know if they thought we was gonna go do something retaliatory to the [El Rukns] or what, but I can remember talking with the police and there was an oral relationship.

There was another time that when the police first started carrying 9 Millimeters, I was, me and Harold Bell was stopped on 51st Street in Chicago, they got out there, in all there were about 7 policemen surrounding us with silver, all of them had silver 9 Millimeters. And I can remember this policeman, I didn't know it until I saw one of the Dirty Harry movies, he had his finger on his nose and his gun like this. I didn't know what that meant, but anyway, what happened and we started talking and I [can't] remember the policeman having a badge or not, but it was an Italian name, something like Cacciatore or something like that, but I was able to pronounce it and he said you are the first guy in this neighborhood to ever pronounce my name right, and then I, we got into a dialog and I told him I went to school with Italians and Polish people and it was very easy for me, you know, to pronounce a lot of those Polish names cause, you know, [Cavolowsky] and stuff like that, those were easy names for me to say. And that kind of broke the ice, and… but one of the things that helped me deal with the police in Chicago was the fact that I looked at them as human beings, and that came from my relationship in Rockford,

growing up in a multi-racial culture, pretty much, in the education, even though there was a lot of discrimination in the education, institutional discrimination. The one-on-one relationships that we formed, you know, was solid, they were good. It had a… It grounded me in a way where I didn't look at police from a fearful standpoint. I always looked at them as a man with a job. And you know. . .

DB: In Rockford, how large, how many members were… how many people were part of the, members of the Black Panther Party?

MT: In the core group we probably had, probably about twenty. That's the core. Community supporters, that extended into the hundreds and these were the people who we could get to do stuff, but our core group wasn't really that big.

DB: When did the Black Panther Party cease local action?

MT: Around 1971, doing stuff as the Black Panther Party. We continued to have a relationship with the Black Panther Party, doing stuff with them, all the way into probably late '76 because it was still efforts being done by the Black Panther Party to do stuff, including political actions, in Chicago and we continued to kinda work with that. Huey P. Newton he really just kinda went off and sent some people to here to try to get us to do some stuff with him but I never rejoined the Panthers. Then of course you've got this new group, the New Black Panther Party which is totally separate from the Black Panther Party that I was working with. The New Black Panther Party was more of a religious group, and, you know, we draw a distinction and we ask people to make sure, cause there is a New Black Panther Party but it's, and it's not based on the old ten-point platform program of the old Panthers.

DB: What was the ten point program?

MT: Freedom for, pretty much freedom for our black community, you know, wanting them to have control over the educational institutions in our community, the economic institutions in the community, the housing, and that, making sure that our rights were asserted. We wanted an end to the police brutality. We wanted, we needed more people from our community to be police in our community as opposed to having people coming in like occupation troops. You bring your gun and occupy this neighborhood but you live someplace outside of Rockford. That type of stuff and also enforcing our rights on the Constitution of the United States. I think one of the things we had that really upset a lot of people we wanted a United Nations plebiscite to be put into the black communities, for the United

Nations to monitor what was happening in the black community to the citizens and bring that before the world court. A lot of people thought that was a dangerous move by itself. Even right now there are some people who will talk who are anti-United Nations who feel that the United Nations and foreign entities who are organized have more power in the United States than American citizens. They even point to… well, I think it was, um, not the World Bank, but the monetary system, the people who determine where the values of stuff are not even controlled by Americans but it's a worldwide thing.

DB: Ok. Now you said you left the party in '71?

MT: Yeah, I came here, that's when we organized the Northern Illinois Community Survival Center.

DB: … and the reason for leaving was?

MT: Oh, it was the internal stuff that was going on in Chicago and so I came back to Rockford, but then at the same time then part of that was I was upset with when they closed the office over by Valerie Percy and a lot of those gang bangers you know take over our neighborhood so to speak cause the Panthers were no longer there with programs. Bobby Rush did that. But he eventually, he apologized for closing [unintelligible]. There was a difference between Fred Hampton's philosophy and Bobby Rush's philosophy and it was conflict with me and Bobby Rush in terms of his philosophy on the significance of Rockford. Fred Hampton was a person who said diversity was a strength and he believed we need to have a strong group in Rockford. I remember he used the term, "you never know, we might get a situation, he said, we might get pinned down at O'Hare and have to call people from Rockford to come help us," you know, and Rush did not think like that. He was more of building his political base. Even right now that's one of the biggest oppositions to some of his supporters in Chicago, you know, that he's not diverse enough in terms of political dealings. But anyway, I left and came back to Rockford to do some organizing. I felt that we was neglecting what was Rockford for Chicago, you know, cause I heard some guys, "there's no revolution in Rockford, revolution's in Chicago," you know, but revolution is everywhere. We was talking about people's rights. People in Rockford had just as much right to have freedom as people in Chicago do, you know, so, but that was a territorial thing and eventually we was able to win, cause after that was when we came up with the 4,000 chickens that we sent from Rockford to Chicago, you know, and I think we organized a shoe drive and a lot of other stuff. So I still worked with the Panthers but I was no longer an official member of the Black Panther Party with some kind of title like Minister of Information.

DB: So was it a situation where the Chicago Black Panthers saw the Rockford Black Panthers as just a sort of source of supplies that they could draw on when they needed it?

MT: Yeah. I, that's a good way to put it. That's exactly what we were.

DB: So it was harder to do things in Rockford then if you were being called into Chicago?

MT: It wasn't harder to do things in Rockford. It was probably easier because of the relationship. It was easy for us to do stuff. It was less friction. Things like, because the community was so close in Rockford, we knew everybody, and we knew the police, it was harder for what we called agent provocateurs, people who were sent in as agents to broke stuff and to discredit the group because the FBI had a dirty tricks program, through the [CoIntel] program. It was easy for us to identify who was coming to do that. It was harder to do. In Chicago it was easier that's why, like the guy William O'Neal who was working with the FBI, he was the one that set up the raid, gave the FBI the housing plan and showed them where Fred Hampton slept and all of that, he was able to operate because of Chicago being such a big place and stuff. He never would have been able to do that in Rockford. Of course, even though, we called him a fool, and we had a tendency to treat the enemy and the fool as one and the same, he, we called him a fool, we didn't know. Later on we found out he was working with the FBI and that was well after Fred Hampton got killed, well after I'd got out of the Panthers, and that was when they had the lawsuit. There was a campaign to exploit black business men and a lot of them were being killed, and the FBI had sent William O'Neal who, he was the head of security for the Black Panthers, we'd not known he worked with the FBI, and so he had to testify about a murderer, about some guy named William Robertson who was a policeman who killed some business men, threw them in the [Sangamon Canal], and so when he testified Jeffery [House], which was one of the lawyers and Skip Cunningham in Chicago was a lawyer representing the Panthers in the suit against the FBI raid on Fred, they came to Harold Bell and said, "did you know that William O'Neal testified as an FBI operative?" And we didn't know that. So that's how we first found out, but my point is that in Rockford we knew people so it was difficult for a person to infiltrate and cause a lot of havoc. But, it was easier to get things done in Rockford than it was in Chicago.

DB: So just generally, how do you feel about race relations in Rockford today?

MT: Oh, there is always room for improvement. I think there is always gonna be that and I say that because of the fact that institutional racism is still a core of the fabric of America and that's what the problem is. Although I think that the issues facing Americans at a crisis point where people have to start

to work with one another, like one of the things that I do right now is, I work with people who have drug and alcohol problems through Narcotics Anonymous and that problem defies race and everything else. The drug and alcohol problem is one that the affluent and the people who are impoverished share, so to speak. Addiction. I am seeing where people are starting to recognize the need to work together. Still, the institutional racism is still there and you know it is important for people to realize that in a capitalist society where you have have's and have not's, class struggle it is so much easier to identify the have not's when you put a racial label on them. You can see it's almost like putting a uniform on and we still dealing with a system where 1% of the population controls 99% of the wealth and if I am not wrong… if I'm not correct about it its only about one or two percent. Still you got… That's an issue in itself, and the danger in that, I think, was manifested in 2008 with the economic crash because the housing bubble crashed and that stuff. The danger in not dealing with that issue in America is that it will not explode, but implode, and people, you know, a lot of people don't want to address that but when you, social equality and economic equality is very important and us maintaining the type of system we have, a lot of the attacks on America is coming from people who feel that's the only way that they can justify trying to change the system, which is not the way of doing it.

I see that left unchanged things are gonna get worse and so I applaud people who are trying to make some changes and [it hasn't made a] big difference. Some people want to stick their heads in the sand, just like people who… I don't argue with people who talk about global warming. I mean there are records and numbers and statistics so there is a correlation there that the numbers are saying it's getting warmer and the conditions, certainly the types of, diverse types of unusual weather patterns is enough for somebody to pay attention to, but that those types, just like the weather, the economic situation is going to start fluctuating, change, you know, and it is now like the criminal justice system. You know, a lot of time people are saying that's a new form of slavery because lot of people are enslaved, primarily people of color, or Latinos, or people who don't have the means to defend themselves, but at the same time when slavery was outlawed one of the things that they started using was the county jail and they'd arrest people and then part of your sentence was you gotta go to this guy's farm and do six months work or something or until you satisfy with the court and this happened a lot in the rural south. Now you have people being arrested, and sometimes it's for different types of charges that shouldn't be and the prisons are privatized. You've got private prisons using tax money, we're paying private people to run the prison, and then now it's expedient to have people go to prison. I mean, it's kinda like the motel six thing, "we'll leave the light on for you," you know. Then you got the marginalization through different types of criminal codes, laws, you know, the drug charges where, you know, you've got difference between crack cocaine sentencing and powder cocaine and most of the time people who are more affluent can afford to buy the powdered cocaine, whereas low income people buy the crack cocaine and the sentences is so much different. I see that as a problem and it's one that if America doesn't address, again, it's not gonna explode, it's gonna implode. It's just like maintenance, if you don't do the proper maintenance on your car or on your house the structure will deteriorate and it'll fall and that's the danger that America has to deal with. What our founding fathers put together, that structure, that foundation, is being eroded by some selfish people who are more concerned about their profits and the sad thing about it as I was saying earlier, most of the base is not even America. Most of your corporate capitalists protect themselves by having their wealth outside of

the country. You know, and, whether I like it or not or somebody else likes it or not, natural conditions dictate that you just cannot continue to operate like that and have good success. I pray for the good success of America. When I joined the Black Panther Party, I did not join the Black Panther Party because I was Anti-America and hated the country, I loved the America. I went to Chicago because I loved the people of Chicago. I was willing to die for the people of Chicago. I felt that if you were afraid to die for something then you were probably afraid to live. And so, my whole thing in the Black Panther Party was never one of this here… [one of those crazy suicide bombers] and all that type of stuff, it was about supporting life, sustaining life, building life, changing life, making it better for everybody, you know, and going from there. Cause I think we are responsible for the less, the less fortunate people in our society, we are responsible. I have a prayer, usually I pray for my family, my extended family, and I pray for the family and I call the flock and then I pray for what I call the Shepard's Fold, people with special needs God has put in my life to help, you know. Sometimes for people who are affluent there's a whole class of people who are in the special needs, a lot of those people that are locked up in prisons, and those special needs, they've got special needs and it's our job, my job, it's those have means to do something about it. In Narcotics Anonymous we have a saying that, "the only way you can keep what you have is by giving it away," and there is a difference between throwing it away and giving it. A gift is something that's valuable to you, it means something to you, I give you this gift because it's precious to me. It's not just some pocket change I'm throwing, that's not a gift, and the only way we are gonna change America is when Americans start giving more to help. Anyway, so much for that.

DB: Haha. No, thank you, that's a great summary. Is there anything more that you would like to add?

MT: Not other than, I think Rockford is a great place to live. And, um, I think somebody, who was it, talking about making Rockford one of the 25th, 25th something cities by. . . I think Rockford is a great place to live, always been a great place to live. You know, my motivation in the Black Panther Party was for the benefit for my community, this community of Rockford. Had it not been for me wanting to improve the conditions in Rockford I never ever, would have never come in contact with the Black Panther Party, cause we wouldn't have sent those letters out asking for help, and that's still my motivation, to improve my community.

DB: Very good.