

Benjamin Chavis - A Man Of The 60's (Continued from Page 1)

sixties and I was just a freshman in high school. Since then, one thing led to another. I began to form associations and meet some of the people involved like Floyd McKissick, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King. I became personal friends with these people and saw some commitment, not only to go and struggle in places far from home, but I even tried to do something around Oxford which led to me even getting beat up when I was fifteen.

In Oxford, we tried to integrate the local movie house, called the Orpheum Theater. Several people, including myself, were physically beaten because of it. But through all of this, this gave me determination to struggle on.

Q. Do you feel that this brutality reaffirmed your commitment?

CHAVIS: I think it was a definite factor for me to continue on the struggle. And then we began to win some victories. The Civil Rights Act, the Voter Rights Act, and other civil rights measures.

Just to have those laws on the book wasn't enough. We had to go and challenge the people to make them implement the law. Civil disobedience and confrontation was necessary.

I almost quit high school, but I didn't. I stayed in. I felt it was just as important getting an education in high school as it was to learn to give of myself in the movement. And I took this with me to college.

For the first couple of years I went to St. Augustine's in Raleigh and got very much involved in the student movement in the Raleigh area. As you know, SNCC, during this time, was formed at Shaw (University).

And I soon left — for personal reasons I had to leave Raleigh — and went to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. It was probably very good for me to do that. St. Augustine's College was a Black school; I learned a lot of important things there. But one of the things that I learned at UNC-Charlotte that I never would have learned at St. Augustine's was the harsh reality of racism in the educational system.

Q. So you think that this type of integration again reaffirmed the harsh reality of racism in America?

CHAVIS: Right. It helped me along. It was just like a stepping stone to be thrown in the all-white university. There weren't but eleven (Black) students there at the time. There was no question — if we eleven students hadn't stuck together we wouldn't have survived. So I took a whole lot of what I learned in the racist, white environment at UNC-Charlotte and began to implement it in the Black community of Charlotte and that's when I was first arrested.

Q. When?

CHAVIS: In 1967-68. I was arrested in Charlotte for making a speech against police brutality. They had a very brutal police department that inflicted many wounds on the Black community.

I thought, not only I, but we as Black students at the time felt that part of our education had to take place in the Black community.

Also, we had to make our education relevant. This was during the time students were asking for Black studies and a Black program. I became the founder of the Black Student Union at UNC-C.

And because of the demands we put on the university, there is now a viable Black studies program at UNC-C.

Q. That was the next question because usually Black studies were phased out.

CHAVIS: On most college campus-



Staff photo by Jimmie Parker

Will the public pressure exemplified in the Hurricane Carter and Angela Davis cases free the Wilmington 10?

es they would either expel the student leaders or claim a lack of funds. At Charlotte we persisted and found donors so it wasn't a question of money. Then they said, "Well, who knows what Black studies are, anyway?" Then we called in Black academicians and really drew up a fine program, academically in terms of meeting university standards and also politically in meeting the needs of the Black community in Charlotte. So now, I feel, one of the best Black studies programs is at UNC-Charlotte.

Q. Certainly not at Chapel Hill. . .

In broad daylight vigilantes would come over and start shooting.

CHAVIS: Right. I remember the Black Student Movement. Preston Dobbins and Reginald Hawkins, Jr., all those were my friends.

Actually, I came to Chapel Hill on several occasions when we were trying to hook up all the Black student unions of the university system. . . the Neo-Black Society in Greensboro and several others. There was a lot of oppression, particularly in Chapel Hill. I felt the chancellor and the authorities there knew that if any kind of movement got a foothold in Chapel Hill, it would spread all over the state. And that's why, to me, there was so much oppression. Preston himself

was even framed up in Asheville one time on a firearms charge. But some of the same things that you all were going through in Chapel Hill, we were facing in Charlotte.

And this was during the time the Duke students. . .

Q. The close down and strike?

CHAVIS: Right, involving non-academic employees, and which led to the founding of Malcolm X Liberation University with Howard Fuller, now Owusu Sadauki.

All this is inter-connected and I

I've been back in the North Carolina prison system is trying to reflect on some of this in writing. I just finished editing a book of what I call psalms. They're like the psalms in the Bible but they're more political and have a lot more content in terms of describing the actual experience, not only prison life but the movement. There's a lot of reflection on the North Carolina movement. The title of the book is *Let My People Go. Psalms of Oppression and Struggle*. Hopefully, that will be out this summer.

That's only one piece. I really want to do some more writing. Not only me, but I'm encountering others to write too. I think one of the most important things that I have to do is to write. One of the things King didn't have a chance to do before he was assassinated was to write more.

Q. That brings us to another question in terms of yourself. Do you feel that you were very influenced by Dr. King? Do you feel he was a very tangible influence on your development as a leader?

CHAVIS: No question about it. I think if I could look at all the Black leaders in America who have influenced me, I would have to pick Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as being the most influential. Malcolm X is another one, along with Frederick Douglas and W.E.B. DuBois. Stokely impressed me some; I was a personal friend of Stokely. But who made me really dedicate my life was Martin Luther King.

I remember the night he was assassinated in Memphis. I just caught myself. . . I was at Charlotte (UNC) at the time. We were planning a tour for Martin Luther King for Dr. Reginald Hawkins. Dr. Hawkins, in '68, was running for governor. As soon as King finished in Memphis, he was to come to North Carolina next. We were planning a whole statewide speaking tour. And, of course, he didn't get a chance to make the tour.

At that time I was a western North Carolina coordinator for SCLC, while I was in college. I wasn't even a minister myself. I was brought up in an Episcopal church which was sort of a middle class Black church, not too much involved. I was at the point of quitting the church. But through all the many rallies, through all the communities I had to go into and organize in '68, one of the most crucial, that was the Marie Hill issue.

Q. From Winston Salem?

CHAVIS: It was Rocky Mount. She was sixteen years old and had been sentenced to death by a North Carolina court. And we decided, a guy named Golden Frinks and myself, decided that we were going to have to turn this state upside down to keep Marie Hill from being sent to the gas chamber. At that point it wasn't clear or not if they were going to give here a chance to appeal the case. It was a one-day trial, all white jury and they sentenced her to death. So we decided to have a mountain top to valley march, all the way from Asheville to Raleigh.

But it was more than just marching from Asheville to Raleigh, because of what we did. We stopped in every town in North Carolina be-

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Q. So you're saying this is very important for the posterity of Black people?

CHAVIS: This is very important. One of the things I've been doing for the last fifteen months since