



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Hal Gordon

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

COHEN: Why don't we start with, how ... Where did you grow up?

GORDON: I was born in a small town in Louisiana, St. James Parish, in a town no one has ever heard of, Latcher [spells it], Louisiana. It sits at the mid point between New Orleans and Baton Rouge along the Mississippi River. Forty five miles from Baton Rouge.

COHEN: So after that, did you go to school there, where'd you go to school?

GORDON: Yeah, I went to school in Baton Rouge, Southern University, land grant college [unclear] outside of Baton Rouge.

COHEN: And then from there?

GORDON: I did four years there, did a bachelor's degree in business education and finished as a distinguished military graduate so I went into ...

COHEN: Really?

GORDON: ... the military as a second job. Stayed in the military for eight years and resigned my commission after eight years.

COHEN: Where'd you serve?

GORDON: Served as—I was a Regular Army officer. I did three years with a combat branch, artillery, and the remainder of my career was with the Transportation Corps.

COHEN: I was in the Transportation Corps.

GORDON: Oh, really?

COHEN: Where'd you serve?

GORDON: Korea, Germany—Mannheim, Germany. Did my training at Fort Eustis, Virginia. Wow!

COHEN: And Fort Story.

GORDON: OK, and then we got to Fort Story. (Laughs) Transportation Corps, huh, what kind of unit were you in?

COHEN: Stevedore.

GORDON: OK.

COHEN: What were you?

GORDON: I was light truck company, I had a platoon of armored personnel carriers in Korea.

COHEN: Oh, really?

GORDON: And this was after the war, of course. And in Germany I commanded a heavy truck company called Dragon Wagons, ten ton jobs.

COHEN: Oh, those are the big ones ...

GORDON: ... The [unclear] tanks from all over Europe, tanks, disabled tanks.

COHEN: So you did it eight years active duty and then?

GORDON: ... and got out, just—I was not quite secure with the security. It was much too safe an environment. It didn't represent a challenge because, you know, all your emergencies were handled by the military. Your wife has a baby, she goes in the hospital and you pay like seven dollars to get her out ...

COHEN: That's right.

GORDON: ... and you go to the dentist and you thank the dentist for working on your teeth, they were just too, just too fixed. Any time you needed to track your career, just take a trip to the Pentagon and they laid the future out, what kind of command you'd have and what grade you might reach. And I got a little tired of it. I needed to know whether or not I would—needed to kind of work my life without the parameters and safeguards and security. I needed to see, I wanted to see whether I was, would be a successful man, I wouldn't fall flat on my face, so, the army wasn't a place for me to test myself. Just too fixed.

Plus, you know, they would probably send me to Vietnam, and I never felt strong enough about risking my life in joining that war. In my younger days I volunteered for Laos and all that stuff but when the shooting started, I didn't feel it was the place for me to be, so I resigned the commission. I was a fairly senior captain at the time, came home, and went back to Litcher, Louisiana.

COHEN: And then?

GORDON: I did—started a business, did a laundromat, just floating around, a little—they call them down home sweet shops, you know, teenage club, and ... Real happy and then I guess it was Hurricane Betsy that hit through Mississippi, Louisiana coast, and I went to work for the Small Business Administration in their disaster loan program making loans to families who'd been, whose homes had been destroyed by the hurricane and water that sat in place for days and days and just wreaked havoc

along the Mississippi coast and Louisiana coast towards the shore. I did that for about a year and was recruited to work at American Sugar Refinery in Araby, Louisiana. It's a little community outside of New Orleans, Domino Sugars. And they were actively recruiting a black to work in a white collar position in the personnel office. And so I went to work for them as the very first minority in the personnel office, the largest refinery in Domino Sugar's network of refineries. That lasted for couple of years and my home boy who was running the Urban League at the time ...

COHEN: Your what?

GORDON: My home boy.

COHEN: What's a home boy?

GORDON: A brother who I grew up with, we grew up through elementary, high school and college. Good friend. He was heading up the Urban League in New Orleans, and he thought that I, it was time for me to pay my dues so I went to work, I left the sugar refinery after a couple of years. Went to work for the Urban League in New Orleans, and after about seven months, he fired me. And through, I imagine, personality conflicts. And gave me thirty days to find a job.

And while waiting for my thirty days an outfit from the Department of Commerce, Maritime Administration, couple of men came in looking for a person to serve in the New Orleans office as a civil rights officer, civil rights specialist. And they were looking for somebody who had experience in an integrated workforce and who was mature enough to handle the trauma of doing civil rights work along in shipyards along the Mississippi Gulf coast, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas coast, from Galveston, Texas, through Mobile, Alabama, on into Florida. And so when they talked about looking for somebody with qualifications like mine I said. "Where do I sign?" So I went to work with them as a rights specialist.

COHEN: How long were you there?

GORDON: I worked in New Orleans with the Maritime Administration for about two years. And I had a fairly stressful situation working for an organization—it was the Maritime Administration—who didn't have a made-up mind as far as how strongly they would prosecute the Executive Order 11246, the one that dealt with equal services under the law, where the government was lending money to finance public facilities and even the subsidy going to the shipyards. And I think I might have been a bit aggressive in prosecuting the law, and I ended up being investigated by the FBI over some trumped-up charge that a gentleman had filed in the state of Mississippi. And so in the approach of the FBI, when I found out it was true, that they were investigating me, I went into their office in New Orleans, they just happened to be the same office where, same building where the Maritime Administration was located. And I asked them, was

it true that they were investigating me, and they told me they had and then I asked what the charge was. And they stated that they didn't—I didn't have a right to discuss the case, only if I was willing to participate in the investigation. So I said yeah, I'm willing, what's up? So they had received a complaint that I had received gifts for personal favors rendered or to be rendered (laughs) and someone got excited. I reported to work in Mississippi driving a new 247 Z car, Datsun company ...

COHEN: Not bad.

GORDON: I remember one gentleman, one black man, approached me, says how you like the car? I said it's a fine automobile. I dreamed of a car like this, it was a sexy car. And he says, what you pay for it? I said, well, let me explain something to you, these cars are just out of the factory and you have to put your order in and when the car comes you have to have cash there. So they don't want to talk trade-ins, you got to have the money, either accept the car that gets off the truck or wait for the next truckload but you've got to have the money, no trade-in, no financing, none of that stuff.

COHEN: Really?

GORDON: So that equated to my having received a new car from some local citizen for political favors that I had rendered or were to be rendered. So they shared that with me. And you know it's not fun knowing that the FBI is investigating you, right? So I, I says OK, if you have conducted this investigation you know by now that I'm the brokest asshole that you ever run across work for the government. I don't have any money in the bank, I don't have any money buried in my backyard, I don't any money tucked away with my parents, you know that I'm broke. And he says, yeah, we've checked that out (laughs).

And I says by now you have gone to my bank in Lutchter and found out that I went to my bank. The car cost about seven thousand dollars at the time. Back then, must have been—got out of service in '64—about '67, seven thousand dollars, and I said, "By now you know that I went to my bank in Lutchter and borrowed the money. And had the cash to pay the dealer for the car. I'm now paying my notes back to the bank that financed it." "Yep." "So now that it's completed, who filed the charge?" And they wouldn't tell me. I says, you have to tell me. My effectiveness as a civil rights officer throughout the state of Mississippi has been jeopardized. Everyone knows that you are investigating me for some ungodly reason. So you have to tell me. What are you going to do if we tell you? I said, well if someone causes such trauma into my life, I would at least have to throw a brick through the windshield.

COHEN: You said that?

GORDON: Yeah. The sucker's got to pay. You know, this hasn't been fun. And you think back about all, all the things that you've done wrong in all your life, you say, oh, God, and they refused to tell me but I

put two and two together and guessed that it was my boss who filed the charge. So I went in to the regional director and reported what I felt. He found out it was true. That one federal official had filed a complaint with the FBI about another federal official and the sand hit the fan. And you know I, I got through it. It was a hell of an experience. So I left New Orleans and joined the Economic Development Administration ...

COHEN: Oh, really?

GORDON: ... Huntsville, Alabama. Stayed there for about six months and the office was moved to—two regional offices merged and had a big regional office in Atlanta. So I put about ten years in Atlanta and became the chief civil rights officer for the region. And around 1980, they—President Reagan, during his inauguration speech, he had put the word out that he would abolish the Economic Development Administration. And he also made a move on shutting down regional civil rights offices because we were giving corporate America and industrial America a lot of hell about the discrimination, segregation and the constraints and restraints that were placed on minority workers in these factories and shipyards. A lot of people were uncomfortable with that, so as a result the President terminated the office in Atlanta, the civil rights office. Gave us an ultimatum, that if you want to work for the federal government, you have to move to Washington, DC, because we were shutting this regional jobs down, want to get all the guys together, right?

COHEN: Keep an eye on you.

GORDON: Yeah, yeah. And so I decided I would get out of the federal government, that I would go back home, Louisiana, and try my hand at import/export business. And I was sitting in my parents' living room watching the inauguration speech, and Reagan said "And I will abolish the EDA" and my father said, "Isn't that where you work?" (Laughs) I said, "Yeah." He said, "What're you doing here? They going to close your shop down and you sit down here. Why are you here?" I said, "I'm getting out, I've got 48 hours to make up my mind whether I want to stay in the government, go to Washington, or get out and I'm going to talk with some people about ..." "Oh, no no no no no. You call the man in Washington now and tell him you're on your way (laughs) you need that federal job." So I listened and called them and left Atlanta and came to D.C. around 1980, shortly after the President's inauguration address. So I worked at the Economic Development Administration here in Washington for, from '80 to ... I retired in 1990. I continued my service as a civil rights officer and then they decided to let me use my urban and regional studies degree and they switched me over to the Urban Planning Office—Office of Planning. And I did about five years doing grants to political subdivisions throughout the Southeast. And in 1990 I gave it up after 30 years service, combined military and federal service.

COHEN: Then what happened?

GORDON: I had met this Washington, D. C. woman, my latter year or so with the feds. She walked in the cafeteria one morning and I just flipped out. I mean this was like somebody sent from heaven, you know, and I pursued her for about a year and a half and finally, she gave me a break and she ended up being a native Washingtonian who was—who had left the Catholic Church as a result of her divorce, and we heard about this—she had heard about this rebel priest name Raymond Kemp.

COHEN: Who?

GORDON: Raymond Kemp, who was pastor of the church at the time, at Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian's, and she thought that she might go in and talk with him about getting back into the faith, and so I joined her. I went with her to see what this Catholicism was all about. I was lifelong Baptist.

COHEN: Oh, really?

GORDON: Yeah. Had experiences with the Catholic Church, segregated Catholic church at home, so I had really no real consideration about being a Catholic, I was happy as a Baptist. But we walked in and I met this guy, Father Kemp, who was quite a charismatic, dynamic white guy who spoke about the plight of the poor in a fashion I'd never heard before. He cared about the poor, he cared about drug addicts, he cared about alcoholics. And he was just putting it out. And I admired that and still do. And so I decided to join, to convert from my Baptist faith to Catholicism because of my concern for his struggle and felt that I would want to help him with the social agenda.

COHEN: Was that a big decision for you?

GORDON: No, no.

COHEN: ... to go from Baptist to ...

GORDON: No, no because I haven't been a principled Christian far as religion is concerned. I've always known that the only way I'm going to get to heaven is through my belief, through my faith, and through the good grace of the Lord. And that political—that religious title has never meant that much to me. I've always only looked for how do I serve. And whatever the religion is called, it doesn't really matter to me. And so I joined that church and on the day that I joined I said to Father Kemp when I went to the altar, I said, "You know, there isn't a single Catholic family in my home town and my mother—if I were to die while I was here in Washington, D. C., in this church, you would have to send my body back to Louisiana as a Baptist. (Laughs). Cause as a Catholic, my mother wouldn't accept the body. (Laughs) Whoa." And his reply was, we can do that, we can fix that. And so I was impressed with my new found faith in that I

saw a lot of resources. Being a Baptist, I mean, we built our own church, right, and we had fundraisers for years to rebuild the church and put the roof on, here was a wonderful structure that you weren't concerned with paying for it, it was there, there were the Cadillacs and the Mercedes out front and the women with the fur coats, and I said, what would happen if these folks went to work in helping the poor. I mean there are so many talented people here. And so I went about setting up a committee of folks from the church to help the priest in doing—in addressing the social ills that were retarding the personal development, struggle of poor people.

And so I was at my desk in the basement of my home, not far from the church and Father Kemp stopped by. He says, what're you doing? Called me Flash of course, Flash Gordon. How you doing, Flash? And I says I'm setting up a, I'm going to organize 100 parishioners, and we are going to be ready to go wherever you send us. I want to give you a hand and deal with social issues so you can get back to doing the Gospel 'cause I'm afraid that many of your parishioners have heard enough about the NA/AA, program so you need to get back to the Gospel, let me help with the social issues. And he said, you have overestimated what you have seen in this church. There is not—there are not 100 people here that has the spiritual involvement to do what you propose to do. And I said, wow, that's cold blooded. And he says, let me send you some people. And what I want you to do, you set stuff that you and your wife picked up at Lifespring. My wife and I ...

COHEN: Oh, you did Lifespring.

GORDON: Yeah, are you familiar with Lifespring?

COHEN: Familiar. I didn't do it, I did some other ...

GORDON: Yeah, we did all the courses, the basic and the advanced and the leadership course. I was coerced into going into Lifespring because my wife has always been straight up, she's a very intelligent, about brilliant, sound thinker, good logic, just a upright person. And I came into a relationship with a lot of stuff. First of all, I didn't like white folks very well. And I guess I can say I was borderline hatred because I just remembered the days when I was subjected to all the burdens of segregation and all the crap that I went through from high school on through college. And I was quite bitter so I didn't deal with white folks very well. And after coming here in D. C., I was a dreadful womanizer. I was free and single and after years of military where living as a commissioned officer you got to be right down the line, you can't have anything, so I kind of went wild. And no respect for women, looking for party, cared less about their issues. And I had a real thing for homosexuals. I remember the day that my life turned around. We were in the Safeway shopping center and my wife—I was just dating my wife at the time—and we had a cart full of food and there was a gay cashier at the end, checking us out. So I say to my wife, my lady,

let's change lines because I don't want a faggot handling my food. And I thought that she was going to punch me in the mouth. Says "You're one sick puppy. Here you're wanting a relationship with me and all my friends are white, most of them are gay. I don't want you anywhere around anybody that I know. You need help." And so she shipped me off to Lifespring.

COHEN: Wow.

GORDON: She coerced me into going. My first position was no white guy can help me, because he's the one who did it to me. So she had one of these gang parties where they team up on you, right, and take you through the thing. And in my defense, I says, I'm not going to pay anybody 600 dollars, I ain't going to pay any white guy 600 dollars to get me straight. It doesn't make any sense. He did it to me in the first place. So my wife being as smart as she is says, "Oh, so it's a matter of cost. So you're reluctant because you don't want to pay the money. Well, I'll pay the 600 dollars for you to go."

So I walked in there. 195 people, about 15 percent black and the first session, the gentleman says—the facilitator, real good facilitator, out of San Francisco—says "How many victims do we have in the house today?" Oh, my hand ran up. "So what are you a victim of, Hal?" "I'm a victim of racial discrimination." And he said, "Sit down, you don't know what you're talking about." So I sat down for two seconds. I was back on my feet. I says, "Wait a minute, I'm paying you 600 dollars, you asked me a question, and I told you that I was a victim of racial discrimination, and you're going to sit me down? No, it doesn't work that way." And he says, "How do you know that you're a victim of racial discrimination?" And I got smart, right? I said, "I got the lashes on my damn back where white folks been kicking my ass since forever. Do you want to know specific stories? I can give them to you. So don't tell me I don't know what I'm talking about." And he said, he handled it well, he says, "What we are going to do is, you sit still for the rest of the day. If you feel at the end of the day that you're a victim of racial discrimination, I'll give you, I'll refund you all your money." Fair enough.

And then about four or five hours, I came to my senses. I mean the dude just stripped me. I mean, just the statement that there are only willing victims. You know, you're a victim of racial discrimination if you allow yourself to be a victim. And I got through that. I realized that I didn't have to be a victim. That many black men and women have excelled having the same experiences that I've had. Didn't hold them back. And so I got through that and as the course went on, I had this thing with white folks. There was a session where you were to identify the least attractive guy in the room and walk up to him and says I find you to be the least attractive person in this building. And you're to sit and explain to him why you feel that way. I was describing this guy. I said, "Here you are, the few times I've spoken with you, you're looking down your nose at me, alright? You're a damn Republican, cause you're wearing that red, white, and blue necktie and you're just messed up. I find you to be the least attractive because you're caught up

with your size and probably your political persuasion. I don't like you." And the dude says, "Well first of all, I have to look down, 'cause you're five seven (laughs), and I'm six ten. (laughs). So the only way I can see you is looking (Laughter) down" and he says, "and you don't know my last name. But I am a Native American. I can tell you some stuff about discrimination." You know, it just undressed me. Here I am disliking folks because of how I associate the white face to my struggle as a kid in Louisiana and down home, you know ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

COHEN: Alright. Let's see, OK

GORDON: Yeah, well I'm not going to take up all that time citing experiences, but I had the scar from that. And, but in working with that Lifespring group, it dawned on me that, you know, I'm thinking that the white man and the white woman spends half of their day trying to retard my progress. I'm thinking that white folks spent most of their time thinking how to kick me in the butt. And I'll be back. And I learned from really participating in Lifespring, white folks got bigger fish to fry. These guys got problems. I mean, there's incest all around, I mean some crap that I'd never heard of in the black community and you know, my heart went out to young white girls who all their lives have lived with the trauma of their uncles and their fathers, you know, dealing with them in that kind of way. And it dawned on me, that well you guys have some things bigger than me to be concerned about. You've had to make a living. You've had to think about putting your kids through school, worry about protecting them, and maybe you haven't spent as much time hating me as I thought you were. (Laughs)

So I got through that and the homosexual thing. You know, all this, out of Lifespring, man, I'd been going to church all my life. College, two graduate degrees and had never dealt with me, because I thought I was OK. And here some little old course like Lifespring, and you know, when you're meeting and dealing with homosexual, gays, and it dawns on you that, man they're making it in spite of what they are confronting every day because of their lifestyle. And I asked myself a question, what am I benefiting from my dislike of gay people? What harm are they bringing to me? Absolutely none. You know. These folks are probably in worse social standing than I am. So I got through that. So through three courses of Lifespring, I dealt with my issue with white folks. I came to understand what my womanizing was all about, no respect for women. And the gay thing just, you know I have a sincere feeling for their plight.

And so when we told Father Kemp these stories about what we had learned through Lifespring, he said to us, I want you to work with 12 people. And I want you to study the Gospel, I want you to mix, integrate the Gospel with your Lifespring experience. Fuse the two, because we want to make the Gospel a

working item here. You know. We don't need folks who come to church every Sunday, cite the scriptures, and all the other stuff you go through as a Catholic. We need working people, we need people who understand that their purpose here is for helping people. So we did that for eight weeks. We met in the basement of our house, my wife's house, and we fused the two. And at the end of eight weeks, we decided to band together and work to help the pastor deal with social issues and call ourselves the Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian's Community Action Group [CAG]. They elected me president and I made everybody else vice presidents (laughs).

You know, I was after the military and all of the schooling, I didn't have time, I guess I was about 55 at the time, I didn't have time for games, you know, so my attitude was, you're all vice presidents, find your mission, find exactly what you want to do, where you're willing to commit some energy toward accomplishing some things, name it, and I will go back to the church, find committee members to work with you in pursuing your ministry. So the guys went off with the parenting and one guy wanted to do, work with the young kids, youth development, and another couple wanted to do marriage counseling, all that nice soft stuff. Nobody knew anything about drugs, including me, right?

So we got started—organized. Father Kemp shared with the archdiocese what we were doing. Catholic based organization addressing social problems throughout the parish. They liked that. And so they called us in and says we like what you are doing and we want to subsidize this, we want to affiliate with you, want to help you create the model. Gave you I remember fifteen hundred dollars a month; man, that was so much money. Fifteen hundred dollars was a lot. Man we bought a laser printer and an IBM computer and we were rolling. (laughs). And so we worked and we, the archdiocese let us use the church at Sixth and East Capitol, St. Cecilia, used to be an all girls school, now a Congressional page building or something, I think the Congress bought the building from the archdiocese a few years ago. Well, let us use it because the place had been abandoned and the vandalism was rampant and so they says do you thing here at this big school. We had the whole school, gymnasium and all. And we were working with young kids from Potomac Gardens. Had a professional musician, a guy named Carter Jefferson who passed a few years ago. He was doing the band instruction and we just had a ball, had a ball. Young kids would come over from Potomac Gardens, Kentucky Courts.

It was all too soft for me. You know, and at that age, I didn't feel that I had time to watch kids grow, you know, I needed to make some impact. I'd spent this time in the government making grants and giving money to folks who you really couldn't see anything happening. So I got serious and I started praying. And I said, give me something else to do. I don't like this. I'm not that fond of children, I ain't ready to raise somebody else's child, plus they're as dangerous as hell. I mean, these kids would throw bricks at you and stuff. You know, I don't want to do that so find me something else to do. And He did. One

evening I was walking my dog along the median here on Pennsylvania Avenue, I was walking my dog along the Avenue here, and saw this building [carriage house at the Old Naval Hospital, Pennsylvania Avenue and Ninth Street SE] and jumped through the window. It was a dilapidated place, no nothing, no lights, no gas, no water. Dirt floors, porous bricks. And I said, wow, wouldn't it be nice to do the CAG program in this building. It took me six months to obtain a lease. My good friend Sam Trammell (?) was running the program next door, so I went to Sam and said, why don't you let me use that vacant building over there, and I want to do my program. And he took a strong position against it. He said I can't afford to have drug addicts mixing with my kids. He was running a youth program. Can't help you. So I learned that it was a city building, so I had a good friend who was close to the mayor at the time, so she got me an audience and told him what I wanted to do. And he says, just get the ANC blessings and I'll give it to you.

COHEN: Who was that?

GORDON: The ANC, Advisory Neighborhood [Commission] ...

COHEN: I mean who said ...

GORDON: Mayor Barry.

COHEN: Oh, Barry, OK.

GORDON: So I went before the ANC and they set up like three community meetings and everyone was opposed. Sam would lead the charge. Not a good mix, the people who he is advocating for and my young people, it's a bad mix so I'm not in favor. The rest of the audience was concerned about my attracting drug addicts and alcoholics to Capitol Hill, and after about three meetings, they finally agreed with 11 stipulations in writing. The biggest one was, you're not allowed to bring addicts into the building for counseling. You have to meet them on the street or you have to go into wherever they live. We don't want any addicts coming into the building.

COHEN: This building?

GORDON: This building, this building. And I said you know, I don't understand that, because once I'm operating, I'm going to be reaching out for addicts. And one day your daughter may walk through the door, this little white lady, elderly lady. And I said, and I will have to find, please forgive this statement, but I spoke, I'm going to have to find the blackest, greasiest, assistant that's within my reach, I'm going to send her into your living room to counsel your daughter. OK.? It was very tough but finally they put the stipulation in writing. I took the approval with the stipulation to the Mayor's office, told him what I

was confronting, he says, don't worry about it. He tore the stipulations up and threw them in the wastebasket and he says do your thing in the building.

And so I came in and I had the Mayor's approval that he would lease the building to me for ten years and I would pay the rent in the way of whatever money I could put in to bringing the building back to kind of making it habitable. Didn't have any money. So I called for my contact at the archdiocese; come on and look at what we're doing, what we're about to do on Capitol Hill. And he was in his—white guy in his three piece suit with the French cufflinks standing in the middle of a dirt floor, and he says how much money is it going to take to do this? I haven't the slightest idea. And he says I understand the guy next door has offered you a couple of rooms in his basement and that'd be so wonderful. We can go in there, and I'll help you. How about the leaky pipes from the ceilings? And he says well we can cover that up, we'll paint them and they'll all go away. What about the busted up concrete floor? Oh, we can get a little linoleum put on top. And I says, where are we going with this? He said, well, the bottom line is, this is too ambitious a project for us to participate in. And I had a few choice words for him, too, sent him on his way. And the following month I didn't get my fifteen hundred dollars. (laughs) My money was cut off over his report that I had a chip on my shoulder in the first place, and I didn't get along with white folks very well.

COHEN: Still.

GORDON: What? At that time, yeah, I mean I just told him what I thought of it, you know, and told him my feelings for ... See, at the time, Bishop Stallings was rebelling against the practices, how the Catholic Church was not responsive to the needs of poor black people. They were losing black Catholics. Stallings was being excommunicated. They were closing three Catholic schools down, three urban Catholic schools, and I thought that it was a time for the Catholic Church to show the poor people on Capitol Hill, we had a bunch of them at the time, we still do, the Ellen Wilson crowd, not the Ellen Wilson, it was an abandoned project at the time, but the Kentucky Courts, Potomac Garden and all the Capper-Carrollburg folks. And, you know, let's show poor black people that we have a heart and we care about them and we're going to erect this symbol of the Catholic Church in the middle of Capitol Hill. But nobody bought it, and so I did it myself with no money, took a year and a half to do it, and thanks to my brother who left his job in Louisiana to come up and help me with the carpentry work and about twelve miracles that happened.

It would take me the rest of the day to tell you about the spiritual journey that I took in getting this place ready to go to work. During that period I came over one day, we had just started the renovation, and we had just gotten the lease signed by the Mayor's office, so I came to this front door, there was a raggedy wood door, and my aim was to kick it down and take possession of this carriage house, right? But it was

during the winter and there was a bank of snow that was blocking my, preventing me from walking through the building, through the door, so I took my foot to level a path through the snow so I could get in through the door and I hit this person, this homeless man who was buried under that snow. And I thought he was dead. So he moved and then I got this message saying, OK, big shot, you're looking for something to do, do something with this that I placed in your path. And it was clear, you know, it was clear, I understood it, I was grateful that God had thought enough of me to be so clear. And I took off. I just did anything that I felt was in His will for me to do. And I had no doubt that I would succeed. So I did anything that I thought that I was able and did it. And you know, and God just showed that I was in his favor because I was obedient, took chances. I had retired from the government with a \$50,000 buyout. I spent 90 percent of it in preparing this place. My wife thought that I had lost my mind. But I told her I just had this feeling that God is waiting to see how much I want to do this and so I spent it, man, I'd buy paint, nails, boom, and we got it done, and so we've been here since '91. So what happened from there, is that your question? No, that's where we are. We've been here since '91 ...

COHEN: But you've been doing more than that, I mean, your efforts have extended beyond your client base here, to the depressed population around here. You've been their spokesman, haven't you, in a way? I mean, how do you see yourself?

GORDON: I see myself as a, I think there's still some anger, still some resentment, still some bitter, bitter, bitter, bitter—what's the noun for being bitter?—I'm still bitter but I enjoy being a Christian. And I enjoy working for a God who has all the power in His hand. So I don't sweat nothing, you know what I mean? I have tried to be a responsible black man. I have tried to fill some gaps. Man, I got into this building, I walked over to Eighth Street to get some lunch, and at Banana Cafe, it may not have been Banana Cafe at the time, but there were two white girls sitting having lunch at the outside Cafe and there were two homeless black men leaning across the railing eating the food out of their plates, and I saw red. I got mad at black men, I got angry at myself for being a part of the system that has allowed social conditions to deteriorate to the point that it has, and I was just angered into action. You know, I just didn't want to be a part of a generation that did nothing but sit back in my comfortable home, you know, and on a golf course, and on my boat and allow things to happen as they were.

COHEN: Despite everything you've done, you still see yourself that way?

GORDON: Yeah, because a lot of people are letting down this country. A lot of people are standing by, I mean capable folks, letting the social order of this country just go to hell. And you know, maybe my training in urban planning has helped me to focus on major injustices. You know, I mean, Sig, you've been down this road. When you see the biggest Naval headquarters in the country for sure being developed on the Anacostia and the thousands of poor families who are being evicted with a bogus

Section 8 card, and for this government to say, you got to get out of here, good luck on coming back. You know. It takes me back to early '80s when Ellen Wilson was being destroyed, demolished. The guys I worked with in here on a once a week basis, the guys came in for counseling and help and we organized an organization called Omega Alpha Brotherhood, but all those guys lived in the abandoned Ellen Wilson project. And one Saturday morning I was in this office, and the guys came running in and says, Hal, they're running us out of Ellen Wilson. There's police all around the place, there's concertina wire being strung. About 15 guys were locked inside the grounds and the rest of them were outside, wondering, what in the hell's going on here?

So I walked over and there was the—there were the leaders of Capitol Hill, the council member on down to the bankers to the real estate people who were talking to the press saying we don't want the scum and the bums in this community. That was there. The press was not interested in talking to me 'cause you know I ain't too much of anybody. They're talking to the Capitol Hill leaders, and I heard it. I remember the faces saying that we want them out of here, we're going to tear down and they could care less what happened. It was a big time for me. I said, OK, let's protest. Let's, you guys on the inside, we set up our little communication, you guys stay in there and we're going to send a message to the Mayor. It was [Sharon Pratt] Kelly at the time. Says, what are you doing here, what's supposed to happen to 75 men and women who call the abandoned buildings at Ellen Wilson their home? What is this? You exterminating us? Where are we to go? Can you give us one of the 14 buildings you're tearing down and let us get in with our own resources and create a place to live? Help us. No answer. And so we got some folks at CCNV to come down, they brought some megaphones down, and we had a great time.

After about two weeks, they pulled up with a blue District bus and they offered all of the homeless that was locked up inside an opportunity to move away from the protest site. Get on a bus and they going to bring them to an apartment and they going to give them a District job. So I say to the group, no, no, something is wrong with this scenario here, but they all got excited over the keys to their own apartment and a job, so they haul them off to Hawk Martin South—North, it's a Holling (?) project north of Howard University, drug infested. So they got them off the bus. They says, walk through the abandoned apartments, pick out the one you want, we are going to give you a job, renovate them. Everybody's happy. First week they are down here on Capitol Hill showing off the keys to their apartment and their ID cards so they are employed. Three weeks passed and pay day came. The drug dealers knowing that the day was pay day for these practicing addicts, they had them boys jumping out of windows trying to get away from them. They all, it was collection day, right? The boys didn't have the money. So they ran them out of Hawk Martin South, I guess it was called. And they all ended up back on the streets of Capitol Hill.

COHEN: No services ...

GORDON: Nothing.

COHEN: No supports.

GORDON: Nothing. And so from that group we started building our residential infrastructure. When the city refused to let us use one of their buildings, a buddy of mine took me to HUD. HUD had a surplus property program going and he was going to take me there, get a house in his organization's name, and transfer it to me so I could put up some homeless people. When we got there, the lady found out I was a 501(c)3 myself, and said, well we can deal with you directly. So end up picking up a house near Hechinger's Mall on Benning Road. It was a four unit apartment building, a dollar a year. So I took twelve men and I said, "OK, the government is great enough to give us this wonderful building, needs work, we're going to fix it and we're going to take care of ourselves. Who in the group can cook?" Had about two cooks. Said, "OK, you're the cook. What we're going to do is, I'm going to collect all these food stamps"—and as you know it's a thing where the homeless get their food stamps and sell them for like whatever they can get for them and use the money to buy their booze or drugs. I said, "I want all the food stamps. I'm going to buy the food and give it to the cook. We will at least *eat* righteously, you know." No problem with food.

And we're going to do every odd job on Capitol Hill that folks don't want to do for themselves. We're going to clean ditches, we're going to sweep sidewalks, we're going to paint houses, we're going to do anything that folks are willing to pay us money to do. And we started that and I didn't want any, everybody had to be able bodied. I didn't want anybody laying in bed all day. You going to rise at seven, we're going to find a job, we're going to do the jobs. And the first week we had enough money to pay the utility and to give each man \$25. And the stipend grew to \$50 a week. We were doing well. I asked who among the group knew the Twelve Step program. One practicing addict, I remember him to this day, said I know the Twelve Steps. I said, OK, you're my drug counselor. You had to at least know the steps. I didn't know zilch about Twelve Steps or anything else, still don't know too much, and so we ran the house on the philosophy that we can take it from here. And we did. And it grew into a second house, a third house, picked up about five houses, included women in about the third house. And we started CAG Residential Treatment Program.

COHEN: Wonderful.

GORDON: Today we've got about five million dollars in properties. Of the five million, about three million is equity. I just hired a guy out of a halfway house who has an MBA from Rutgers. (laughs) I said, you know, take a look at my buildings and tell me what we are worth here. He completed the survey two weeks ago. He had Long and Foster help us determine the market value.

COHEN: Five million dollars.

GORDON: And so, we're doing pretty good.

COHEN: Are you now involved in some kind of treatment program with the courts, with Judge ...

GORDON: Yeah, Judge [Anita] Josey-Herring. Yeah.

COHEN: Tell me about what you think about that.

GORDON: Well, let me give you a little background. We were busy developing a center, a building that we bought at 15th and Independence, where we do our fellowship on Sunday mornings and any general assembly meetings we want to have. We were busy doing that. Got the word that the city had put out an RFP [Request for Proposal] about \$3 million to work with women and their children, this was about four years ago. And so I sent my real estate person out to find property that could accommodate a women and their children program, so we found a place over in Anacostia. Three twelve unit apartment buildings on the same lot, ideally situated. We bought it, well we acquired it, still paying for it, and I hired a grants writer, paid her seven thousand dollars to write this proposal, we wanted \$2.1 million of the \$3 million, and six months heard nothing from the city about who had won the award. Learned later that the city had put the RFP out and didn't have money to cover it in the first place. (laughs) So I got this building, three buildings (laughs), paid seven thousand for the application to be prepared and no money. So went back to work at our facility at 15th Street and then about two years ago, the same organization came back, said we want to lease one of ...

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GORDON: We continued working on the buildings and then the Family Court was established and they were using monies that had been appropriated by the Child and Family Service Agency to do this, support the Family Court by establishing a treatment program that would work with the mothers and their children. And so the city informed me that my property that I'd been working on was the most viable piece that—one of the few spots in the city that could accommodate this program. So they asked me if I could speed up the renovation and if I would accept a grant to do a treatment program for the Family Court. Women appear before the Family Court, and they are offered an opportunity to volunteer to come into treatment along with their children. If they refuse treatment, then the court would, you know, deal with the situation as far as whether or not they could keep their children or whether children would be displaced. And so they gave us the opportunity and it was well supported and so we made the place really

nice and so we have graduated 13 families in the program. We started April 1 of last year. We've had two graduations, and it's a marvelous program.

COHEN: I know about it. It's a terrific program.

GORDON: Oh, you do?

COHEN: And I know you got selected for it. It's a unique program. It's the only one of its kind. And only one judge apparently is ...

GORDON: There's another judge who is the presiding judge of the Family Court ...

COHEN: Satterfield.

GORDON: Yeah, right. You know the players. That's right, you're in the business. But it's been a marvelous experience. You know, before we didn't have the capability of dealing with children, we were only serving adults. Here we are, currently we have roughly 13 women in this facility and about 32 children. And you know, when it dawns on you that, wow, we're working with families here. We've got women who've gone through a rough time, children even rougher times, and here God has placed, you know, impoverished, damaged, abused women and our job is to help, intervene in their lives to make it right for them to reunite with their children. Awesome!

And after that, the city approached me and said we want to do a program called Nurture for Life where pregnant women ...

COHEN: What for life?

GORDON: Nurture for Life, name of the federal program, treating women who are pregnant and their children, treating them through the birth of their child and make sure that the child before it's born is protected and cared for and for a period of time after the child is born. So we got the Reuniting Women in one building and their children and in the other building we've got pregnant women and their children. Awesome, you know. We meet, they're all invited to participate on Sunday mornings at our fellowship.

COHEN: Is Don Isaac your ...?

GORDON: Don Isaac is a wonderful guy who's agreed to serve as the—we have to find a title for him—he's our senior minister meaning that I'm not a, I don't have those tendencies, right? So I try to live a Christian life but I'm not one to teach people how to be Christians, so I needed a seasoned minister to make sure that I comply with protocol as far as providing the Word and the spiritual food to my clients. I had a young man who is a graduate of a program, who's now studying to be a minister, he's been

ordained and he's my presiding minister. He makes sure the right stuff goes out. And Rev. Isaac preaches at least one Sunday a month and he heads up my leadership council that makes sure that we are complying with the social graces and the religious orders and that kind of stuff. Having a wonderful time.

COHEN: He's a great man.

GORDON: Yeah, yeah. He's a good man. He's got quite a task ahead of him.

COHEN: Are you part of his CJCJ? [?]

GORDON: Well, I think I'm on record as a member, but whatever he needs from me, he's got it. And I think he treats it the same way.

COHEN: What's going to happen in your view in this city? What's it going to take to build some equity into this whole process of modernization or gentrification or whatever you want to call it? How can we get equity back into the picture? For the lack of a better word, justice back into ...

GORDON: Well, I think, this is an awful thing to say, but I think we are past the point of no return. I don't see it happening. The scale is so imbalanced that I can't envision what it would take to right the scales of justice in this city. You know, in this capitalistic society, there is no voice for the poor. You look at Capitol Hill. Everything that has happened since I've been here living on Capitol Hill has been to almost the detriment of poor people. When we talk with the people from the city about that redevelopment of thousands of new properties over there where they're chasing off the Capper and Carrollsburg people out, there's no mention of social development, there's no mention of social planning. They're all totally preoccupied with land use planning. Everything goes down. We build the houses. We build the office buildings. They're probably tearing churches down over there. We're both associated with STRIVE. That building is gone. Where STRIVE goes, who knows.

And when we had some boys from public housing up here talking to us, you were probably in the meeting, what happens to the social fabric? What are you planning, what are you going to put into place to make sure that the folks who are moving out have the training, whatever that looks like, to return? What are you doing to protect their rights to return? "We're just land use planners." Well, who does the social planning? I haven't the foggiest idea. Nobody! Nobody's concerned. And it's frustrating. A few years ago, and I guess I'll never get over this, the school system was selling Buchanan School, wonderful facility. CAG asked the City, let us use the building, we don't have much money, we'll raise the minimum, but we need that as a place to play hospital to this community. Somebody has—you can't expect organizations like CAG to help people if you sell all the physical resources off to this, the group they sold the building to, it didn't make any sense. It reflected absolutely no regard for the personal

development of poor black people. They sold it to an outfit from Virginia who proposed to teach English as a second language for immigrants, I guess. You know, Potomac Gardens—that Buchanan School sits in the middle of Potomac Gardens, Kentucky Court, what a wonderful place to nurse people back to good sound health. You know, the District felt that the CAGs and the STRIVE and the Southwest Collaborative, no. I did a protest. I pitched my tent out on the ground. And my board members made me discontinue it after a couple of weeks, but when that happened I was hurt. I had said there's not—I don't see the embryo.

COHEN: You've had a God-led life, this whole thing.

GORDON: For the most part, yeah.

COHEN: What part did the Buchanan School experience play in that? There's been a pattern for you. Have you found out what part of the pattern the Buchanan School experience was?

GORDON: How that has influenced who I am?

COHEN: Whatever.

GORDON: Well, it has enhanced my faith. It has mellowed me down to the point where I shouldn't be disappointed by what others may or may not do. Give it your best shot. And with the God that I work for, things are going to be alright. And I just, my faith I believe is strong enough to make me feel half way at ease with knowing that I'm taking a good shot at this. And at my age, I don't pull any punches. When they were trying to give this building next door [Old Naval Hospital] away to the Mayor for his residence, and then when that fell through they want to make a Naval Museum, and the folks coming through with the TV cameras, they were taking measurements, nobody cared enough to walk through the door and say, "Hal Gordon, what are you doing here? What is this organization?" Nobody cared. And I took the position, and I still do, let them do what they want to do with that building, but the day that it happens and they tell me that I have to move, I'm going to cry, loud. I will not sit here and let the city ignore all of the social benefits that we have delivered in this community.

They will have to recognize that we are here for a purpose and we've done a good job. And as much as I want to be a nice peaceful citizen, who hasn't raised any hell and have tried to co-exist with all the leaders on Capitol Hill, when they make the move to ignore the contribution on the part of this agency and our worthiness of being in this wonderful location, I'm going to scream. I don't give a damn who I embarrass. I'm going to publicize the hard-heartedness of this city. Not that I need recognition. I'm perfectly contented in doing what I'm doing. But to have the city say, as they say in the case of Boys' Town, this is too valuable a property for you to be doing social services. You're not doing anything for the tax base,

you're non-profit, we don't want you attracting addicts and the homeless and the alcoholics to this place. You have to go.

I'm not going to take it. I'm not going to take it. And the day is coming. Because I just don't see the commitment to helping people. You know, I see everybody marching to the will of America, that says let's build a tax base in this city by attracting middle class and upper class back into the inner city. And nobody is concerned about what happens to poor people. You know what's happened to poor people. They give these vouchers, they run out to Prince George's County. You know, Prince George's County says you can't send your poor out here; we're not your bedroom community.

COHEN: Your Ward 9.

GORDON: Yeah, deal with your poor. There's some things happening but for the most part I think we're past the point of no return. I don't see this city having the will to be fair and equitable for the poor. Every move that happens on Capitol Hill is to the detriment—why, I don't want to get on that soap box. I don't see it happening. Jobs? The last collaborative meeting, full collaborative meeting, there was a presentation by the—what's that outfit called, that's developing Eighth Street?

COHEN: Barrack's Row.

GORDON: Barrack's Row. Good friend of ours brought the gentleman who's heading up that program and he's talking about all the new business that's coming to Capitol Hill, so I asked the guy, how successful have you been in recruiting black business persons to Eighth Street? Oh, well. What is your percentage of black businesses out there? Well we don't keep any kind of records on that kind of (laughs). Wow.

COHEN: Last thoughts.

GORDON: I was saying whenever I've reached my philosophical limit, I say this society is requiring black people to be colored again.

COHEN: What does that mean?

GORDON: Meaning that we've got to take to the streets. Meaning that it's not a level playing ground by a few voices speaking out, chasing ambulances, trying to keep the poor intact. The situation will continue out of balance. And it's going to require poor people, and I'll be bold enough to say predominately black people and their friends, to say we ain't going to take this shit anymore. They got to go to the streets. They have no other opportunity to right the playing field. They've got to go to the streets. They've got to make it known that the racial climate in this country is getting worse. The system of the balance is

worsening and, you know on Capitol Hill, we don't have a middle class black community. There's nobody to speak for the poor. Nobody.

COHEN: There are middle class blacks up here.

GORDON: Well ...

COHEN: Not many, but there are some.

GORDON: Yeah, I'm sure. We've got government workers, we've got business people, but nobody is coming out of that protective environment to say, hey, wait a minute, this is wrong. You know. When I was setting up—when I bought the building on 15th Street, a black woman who was part of the neighborhood community, kicking my butt for opening up a drug treatment facility in the middle of the neighborhood, she says, “We've got, we're overrun by addicts, what do you mean bringing 70 more addicts in our community?” I says, “Lady, my people are prohibited from drinking or drugging. You and your children use more drugs and alcohol in your living room than all of my people combined in a year. And don't get caught up with this protecting my property values here, we're talking about people who look like you who need help.” I didn't convert her. She stills feels that way. And so I'm ready to hit the bricks in my world by speaking out and saying, hey, this is not right. What the actor from the movie said, I ain't going to take this shit no more (laughs). Amen. Thanks a lot.

END OF INTERVIEW