

Listen to Sala Udin (b. 1943), Freedom Rider, former city councilman, school board member, and actor, talk about growing up in the Hill District neighborhood, getting involved in the NAACP, and shifts in the civil rights movement. This interview was conducted and recorded by Charlene Foggie-Barnett and Kerin Shellenbarger on May 5, 2011.

Excerpt 1: Growing up in the Hill District, experiencing its demolition

Then we moved to Fullerton Street, um, on the corner of Epiphany and Fullerton. Um, and I watched a cavalcade of culture along Fullerton Street that was amazing every day. Um, it was as though your house was right on a parade route and you could see things happening every day – people going in and out of the Washington Club and the Loendi Club, people going in and out of Stanley’s, people going up to the Rhumba show, people going to Goode’s drugstore, uh, people going back and forth, uh, from the heart of the cultural district of the Hill District which was Wylie Avenue and Fullerton, so we were right here at Epiphany and Fullerton, and Centre Avenue was over here. So, people who were coming from Centre Avenue over to Wylie and Fullerton, or going from Fullerton and Wylie back over to Centre, all had to pass our window – at um, 1420 Epiphany Street.

And then a rumor started to circulate that was very scary, and that was that everybody in the whole neighborhood was going to have to move because they were tearing down the whole neighborhood. And I worried, well what’s going to happen to my friends? Um, and am I going to have to make new friends? I don’t know the- I don’t know anybody else but these people. Where am I going to go to school? Why we have to move? It was, it was awful, and there weren’t any answers, there were just questions. Um, eventually my parents confirmed, yes, the rumors are true, we have to move, um, but we’re moving to something called the projects. I had no idea what the hell the projects were – um, but eventually we moved and I found out what the projects were.

Excerpt 2: Getting involved in NAACP as a high schooler in New York, busing to Washington DC

I liked to talk, and they liked to hear me talk, and so I was doing a lot of talkin.’ And the next thing you know, um, a man, uh, from the adult NAACP uh, on Staten Island, NAACP branch, got us to form a youth council of the NAACP. And of course, all the youth said, Sam, you should be the president of the youth council ‘cause you’ve got a gift of gab, you can talk. And they gave us a task of um, we’ve got a bus trip coming up, and we’ve sold most of the seats on the bus and we have some seats left, um, and we want to see if this youth council can fill these seats that we have left. And the bus trip was a bus excursion to the March on Washington, August of 1963. We not only sold the seats that they had left; we filled another bus just with youth, so that the youth had a bus and the adults had a bus. And we went down to Washington DC to the March on Washington.

Excerpt 3: March on Washington

And we arrived early in the morning, um, and as the August sun in Washington DC got hotter and hotter and hotter, and the day went on, and speaker after speaker, and everybody was really waitin' for the main keynote speaker of the day, was a man named Dr. King.

And when he came out, a quarter of a million people just fell completely silent, and he spoke about what was happening to civil rights workers and people who lived in the South where he had come to Washington DC from. And he came with a message to tell Washington that they had given Black folks a bad check, and he came to make that check good. I'd never heard anybody speak like that, except maybe Malcolm, in Harlem. And I said to myself, standing right there on the Mall in that hot sun, sweatin' – I said I, I wanna, I want to join whatever it is he's doing – I want to be one of them. And eighteen months later, I was on a bus headed for Mississippi, um, having been recruited by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and SNCC to come to Mississippi to work on voter registration, integrating schools and lunch counters, and so I had the opportunity to become a Freedom Rider. So that's how I got involved.

Excerpt 4: Civil rights movement shift away from non-violence toward self-defense

The movement shifted in the South. My commitment for Mississippi was supposed to be for four months, and then I was supposed to go back to New York and finish college. [sniffs] Um... but four months turned into four years, and toward the end of the four years, the movement of integration and non-violence, and the focus on southern segregation laws and practices got confronted by Black Power. And the young people in the movement, young Blacks in the movement, rejected Dr. King's non-violence – we had just lost too many, and we weren't going to just be non-violent; we're going to pick up self-defense.

Excerpt 5: Civil rights movement shift, continued

And the whites who had come to the South to work in the civil rights movement were encouraged to go back home and work on white racism back home in the cities where you come from, and, because we are going to start a Black Power movement, and there's no room for you. And we're rejecting integration, we're rejecting non-violence. And we didn't realize it then, but we also were shifting the front lines of the movement from the south to the cities of the north – it shifted.

And since I always wanted to be on the front lines, I shifted with it, and found myself thinking about where will I go, the movement is moving to the northern cities, where will I go? There's not much happening down here anymore – the integration movement is dead, the non-violence movement is dead, um, and so the place that it made most sense for me to come back to is Pittsburgh – is home. And so I started coming back to Pittsburgh and eventually, um, came back to stay, um around '68 or '69.

Excerpt 6: Memories of Charles "Teenie" Harris

I didn't know Teenie well – he was just a *Courier* icon. Um, Teenie never stood still long enough to get to know him well. Teenie had a pipeline into the community in such a way that he knew everything that was going on, and he had so many things to cover, that Teenie would sweep in, 'pop!' hit it, and Teenie's gone. So you don't have a chance to interact with Teenie, and he wasn't trying to get involved, or get deep into whatever he was taking a picture of – he knew it was an important occasion, he knew who the most, the key players were, and he would come in, and take one shot, or a couple shots of different pieces of what was going on, and then he's out the door to the next thing. So you never really got a chance to get down with Teenie – he was gone.

Excerpt 7: Reflecting on different kinds of activism

When I look back, I go all the way back to the debates of the, in the South when we first debated Black Power versus integration, um, we didn't do well in that dialog, um, and we weakened the movement considerably by kicking the whites out. Um, we created a perspective of, of Black Power and Black Nationalism that felt good and progressive but in fact, it separated us from the very people who we proclaimed to organize and represent, you know what I'm saying? And um, so all along the way, the debates, to the extent that they are separate, uh, and divergent, the movement is weak. Where they come together and dialog and listen to each other, the movement gets strong.